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featuring **ASYLUM EARTH** *a novel by Bruce Elliott*

and **THE GUIDED MAN** *a novelet by L. Sprague de Camp*

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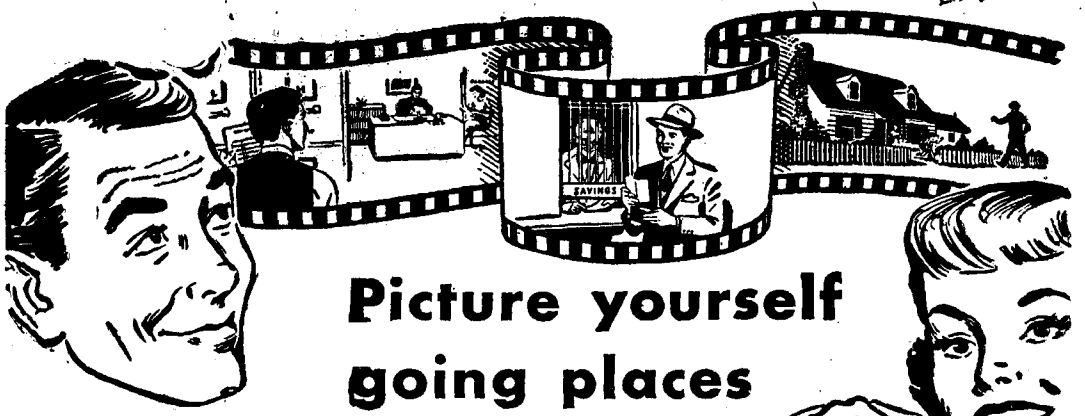

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Vol. 27, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION October, 1952

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The humans were no match for the Children who hated them. Children who were less than Gods — and more than mortals!

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A Science Fiction Department Featuring Letters from Readers

A Life in the Day of an Editor

AN EDITOR who gets cornered by fans and hammered into the rug with questions soon learns to his wonder and dismay that there is a body of myth surrounding publishing procedure which rivals the imaginative flights of science fiction itself.

Sub-titled "Things We Believed Until Now," a summary of current ideas enthusiastically embraced by large numbers of fen might look like this:

All editorial offices are lush palaces, with teakwood desks, rugs in which you sink to the knee, gold-plated telephones and ashtrays carved out of a single giant ruby.

Two gorgeous blonde secretaries, of a beauty to make Marilyn Monroe leap from her calendar, wait upon the editor slavishly, instantly responsive to his slightest whim.

The editor spends his day at important staff conferences with (1) the publisher, (2) artists and writers, (3) high government officials begging for his advice.

Authors are paid fabulous rates for their stories, live in 40-room Norman chalets, ride in Cadillacs weekdays and Rolls Royces on Sundays, dictate their stories into gold-encrusted tape recorders, or if they deign to type them themselves, use solid platinum typewriters.

Stories are bought for each issue approximately fifteen minutes before the magazine hits the stands.

Science-fiction editors not only have more brains than Einstein, but know more science, being firmly grounded in half a dozen of the physical sciences, plus having a walking acquaintance with most of the esoteric and occult fringe cults.

Every editor has a direct wire to Washington, where the top men of half a dozen scientific projects eagerly shoot him the latest developments in atomic and rocket research.

Editors are more scientists than literary men, merely tolerating the story form in order to get the science across, and should be drawn and quartered if a scientific boner gets through in one of their stories.

And last but not least: All science-fiction editors are nine feet tall.

These are myths which bring a nostalgic tear to the eye. We only wish half a dozen or so were true; and if you think we are going to dispel them all in one fell swoop you're crazy. Leave us retain *some* shreds of illusion. The showgirl finds little glamor backstage; only hard work, impossible hours and a topsy-turvy life; but she knows how it looks from out front and just what it is the customers are buying. So, even as we trip over the worn place in the asphalt tile on the way to our desk, let us preserve the fan's illusion of knee-deep Persian rugs and paneled walls lined with original Schomburgs.

Visitors to the sanctum have to look between the huge pile of manuscripts on the right and the only slightly smaller pile of fan letters on the left to find ye Ed who, no flyweight, is nevertheless all but buried behind them. And if they hang around awhile they'll find that an editor's day, rather than Hollywood-type conferences around a polished table, consists of dealing with one frantic emergency after another . . . such as:

Artist Snifflefritz, who has never seen a Martian frommleglif in his life, has drawn a recognizable Terran salamander instead, and the picture has to be done over. It goes without saying that Snifflefritz cannot read, hence is unable to extract the description of a frommleglif from the story itself.

Who's going to do the illos for the new Crossen novel? Finlay stayed up all night finishing the work for the issue before last and he just got the stories for the last issue, so we

(Continued on page 128)

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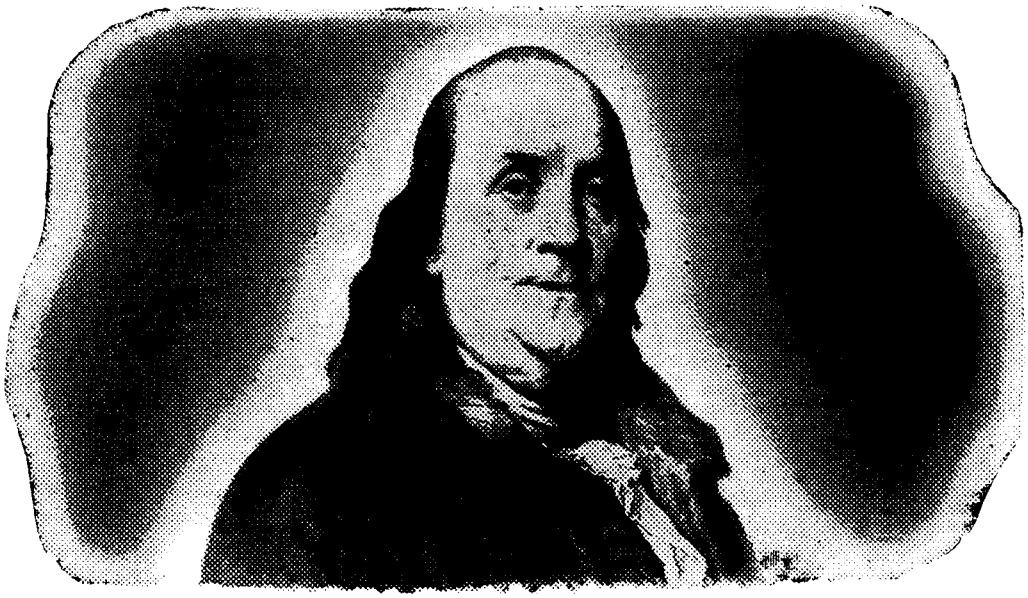
WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

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The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

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TOTAL OF $1,500.00

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Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This Is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

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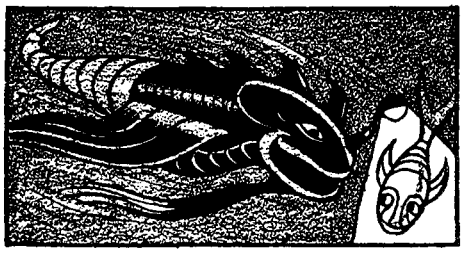
What's Up Down There?

The Unexplored Floors of Our Oceans



EVEN if we had no hope of reaching and exploring other planets, nearly three-fourths of the surface of our own planet remains unexplored—some of which can *never* be touched by the foot of man. We refer, of course, to the floors of Earth's oceans . . . about which we know far less than we do of the landscapes of Luna!

If the newly-discovered record depth of 35,640 feet in the Mariana deep were next to 29,000-foot Mount Everest, an elevator shaft from the deepest known point on Earth's surface to the highest would have to be over twelve miles high . . . and though the top of Everest will likely be trodden by men before another planet is, it's a safe bet that the Mariana deep *won't* be. Men just can't exist under seven miles of water.

Something's Cooking

Granted, some titanic convulsion might hoist the deep up above the surface of the sea—but 35,640 feet is one hell of a hoist. A cataclysm of that magnitude might set the uncertain surface of our globe to energetic twitchings that would destroy us all!

Following this pleasant line of thought, there *is* something cooking in the South Pacific: since 1950, new islands and peaks and shoals have been popping up like fans at an all-Finlay auction; and they don't stay up—they're likely to sink again at any moment.

The menace to navigation is comparable to that of meteors in space . . . one's liable to slap you before you know it's there.

Men have been trying for hundreds of years to find out what's down there under the briny. At first heavy weights were used, taking many hours to lower and raise. Much later came echo-sounding—sonar.

High-Frequency Sound

Sea-water is an excellent conductor of sound waves (submerged hydrophones on the California coast have picked up the sound of only *two pounds* of TNT exploded off the coast of Hawaii, 2,300 miles away!), and while radar is useless for this purpose (its ultra-short waves, though they can penetrate the ionosphere, can't get far through water) sonar uses high-frequency sound vibrations that are easily bounced off the sea-bottom, or submerged mines, or what have you . . . even sometimes, as happened off the coast of California, from nothing at all! (Radar too, above California airports, has reported the presence of invisible objects . . . we don't quite know what to make of all this; but anyway, we're staying away from California!)

There's even another method by which the ocean floor may eventually be explored: the Earth is slowly drying up, reports Dr. Hans Petterson of the Oceanographic Institute of Sweden, and someday the oceans will be mud-puddles and there'll be new continents all over the place.

Only catch is, that'll be about a billion years from now. We probably won't bother to come back and check—all the way from our star colonies!

—Lewis Island

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ASYLUM EARTH

A Novel by BRUCE ELLIOTT

The humans were no match for the Children who hated them . . .

these Children who were less than Gods, more than mortals

First

IT WAS no time and no place. She stirred uneasily, knowing that they were trying to awaken her. They could be so annoying . . . There, it was beginning!

"Mother!" The thought pounded at her, nagged at her, irritated her. "Mother! Please . . . please."

"What is it now?" She asked although she knew quite well why they were harassing her.

"Please let us grow up. Please don't hold us here anymore. . . ."

"But, my dears, my very dears," she pleaded for understanding, "mother knows best." She simulated a laugh.

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"After all you must remember that you are not the first four children that I have had."

One of the male brains thought harshly, so harshly that it made the Mother almost angry, "But we are the only ones that have ever been kept in kindergarten so long."

The silly youngsters . . . as if she didn't know what she was doing . . . but then, perhaps all the superstitions about the children of one's middle life were true. Perhaps something different happened during those fatal menopausal years. She reckoned swiftly. How old had she been when they were conceived? Aeons ago—but they were still infants, daring to attempt to tell her what her duty was. The audacity of them!

She was tempted, but only momentarily, to chastise them. There was no doubt of it, they were dearer to her than any other of her more normal, more grown-up offspring. These four, the three males and the one female were her darlings.

The children waited for an answer to their plea. But there was none forthcoming. The angry male mind lashed out. "How long, Mother, how long?"

"Until I am good and ready!" This time she was angry. "I shall be away for three of your days. Completely out of phase with you. I want you all to be good children! Don't make me cut my vacation short!"

Then there was nothing. The children knew that she had cut off communication with them. The male contacted his brothers and sister. "Now," he thought, "now, do you agree with me?"

The others were in rather reluctant accord. The male continued. "Then I have your confidence in what I am planning?"

There was fear of what they were doing, but at last, they all agreed. He would proceed, and damn the consequences. . . .

I

Nature is nowhere accustomed more openly to display her secret mysteries than when she shows traces of her workings apart from the beaten path.

—WILLIAM HARVEY

HARRY BOYCE glanced at his pinky watch. If he left work at four o'clock instead of four thirty it would give him enough time to shop and still get home for what he wanted to do before Nils dropped in.

He was a little hesitant about asking his boss for the time off, but taking a deep breath he walked through the maze of desks towards Mr. Langley. "Would it be all right if I left a little early today, sir?" he asked.

Langley glanced up, shook his head from side to side and said, "Boyce, I do think that you should try a little harder. After all we only ask for four hours work a day, and it does seem to me that you could manage to give us your undivided attention for that length of time. Why, do you realize that in my grandfather's time men had to work eight solid hours a day?"

Boyce sighed but contained himself. Langley was off on his pet tirade. He seemed to think that there was something unfair about a world that didn't work its employees into an early grave. Eight hours a day! How had those old timers borne up under it?

Langley concluded, "And remember, I'm letting you off today, but I want you in early Monday to make up for the lost time!"

To make up for the lost time! Boyce turned away and as he did so his eyes ran over the endless cabinets each one filled to over-flowing with micro-film records of laws, laws and more laws. He had never thought when in college that his desire to stand up before a judge and plead with tact and delicacy intricate cases full of interesting legal points that he would end up a drudge, one of a thousand others slowly blinding himself poring over micro-films. A law clerk! And that was just about all the future held. Law had become so com-

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plex that no hundred men could any longer pool their knowledge and make a decision. The only way the clogged courts ever spewed out an opinion was after endless checking and cross-checking of millions of laws.

To make up for lost time! He snorted to himself. Sysiphus had at least had a sporting chance of pushing the rock up the hill before it clattered down again. Lawyers had no chance at all of ever getting to the top of any hill.

Leaving the office he put it all out of his mind. He drew the list of things he wanted to buy from his pocket and planned an itinerary. If he took the slow sidewalk he could get directly to Abbo's Surgical Supply house. Then across town to a kosher butcher store, yes, he could manage it in the time at his disposal.

He felt the package of herbs in his pocket. Getting them from the gourmet store on his lunch hour had been a break. That had saved at least a half an hour. The biggest problem was getting the dirt . . . and how was he going to do that without being seen?

First things first, he decided not very originally, and made his way off the moving sidewalk into the shining store that supplied doctors with their needed gadgets.

Walking to the counter he rapped its plastic impatiently. He lost his impatience when the clerk made her way to him. It was delightful watching her jiggle. And there were lots of things on her that jiggled.

"May I be of assistance?" she asked. Her voice was low and sweet, like Ilse's, he thought. Aloud, he said, "Yes, I'd like an autoclave."

"Certainly sir." She jiggled just as nicely in the rear, he thought idly, as she walked towards the back of the huge store. She was a little smaller than Ilse but certainly there were a lot of resemblances between them.

She returned with a package ready-wrapped in clear plastic. "Anything else, sir?"

"No, I think not." He paid for the autoclave from a thin supply of credits. He hoped his resources were not going to be too strained by his hobby.

He left reluctantly. Perhaps another day would do just as well for hobbying. The clerk had looked as if she would not be too insulted by an invitation to dinner. He knew he was kidding himself even as he thought of it, for he knew he was far too shy to make such an advance, but in his day dreams he was the conquering male . . . he was like Nils.

He put the whole matter out of his mind. The kosher butcher store was next. He made up a little time by some tricky foot work on the variously speeding sidewalks. Glancing at his watch he saw he had an hour before sundown. If only he wasn't delayed at the cemetery it would work out just right. In the butcher store he bought a live rooster. The butcher seemed a little surprised at his failing to have the fowl slaughtered.

We Hope It's Fiction

OUT of recorded history have come the legends of strange and miraculous occurrences to frighten and baffle mankind—to spawn whole systems of mythology and theology and fill books with stories and tales and poetry and song. Some of it has been gay, some fearsome.

In modern times Charles Fort has used them to dig his harpoon into the organized stuffed shirts of the world. Science-fiction writers have used them as a basis for stories running the gamut from visiting aliens to the "we are owned" themes. Bruce Elliott has given it a different and frightening twist. If your hair tends to stand up as you read it, remember it is only fiction—we hope.

—The Editor

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FEELING a little foolish he had the bird placed in a big bag with some holes punched in it for air. The autoclave under one arm, the herbs in his pocket, and the rooster in the bag he left the butcher store. It was twilight. Five miles to the cemetery, and then home.

Even the graveyard offered no problems. There was not a soul in sight as he put his packages on the ground. Glancing around him to make doubly sure that he was not being spotted, he crouched over next to the pale, gleaming, silvery spikes of the fence. It was not even necessary to go into the cemetery. He could reach the dirt right through the spaces in the fence. He scooped up a copious handful and dropped it into the bag with the rooster. The bird clucked complainingly and he looked around. Had anyone heard anything? Was he seen?

No—reassured, he hurried home. His tiny crowded furnished room awaited him. He made his way across the sidewalks to Fifth Avenue and Forty-Ninth Street. The aged mansion seemed even more dilapidated than usual. He tried to picture it the way it must have looked before helicopters changed the real estate picture of New York. It was hard to do. He was so used to the wealthy living hundreds of miles away that he could not picture the day when they had lived in town. Even the middle class lived an hour's flight away. The suburbs had raced away from the city. Now the worst slums were in areas like Mamaroneck and Mount Vernon which had been deserted in the rush to get to more comfortable commuting residences. None but the bachelor, or the lonely or the very poor still lived in New York proper.

His heels clicked on the still shining marble of the foyer. Endless footsteps had worn depressions in the stone, but the effect was still magnificent.

No sign of his landlady, which made it a red letter day, for once she had hold of a person she never relinquished that hold till her day of woe and imaginary illness had been spilled in endless profusion into even the deafest ear.

Upstairs on the fourth floor he shut his door behind him. It was good to get home, good to get away from the workaday world. He tapped the switch and light poured down on his untidy dream world.

A raffia rug, a primitive design woven in garish splendor reflected a reddish light back onto the totem that stood in one corner. Its square-headed top faced a devil mask that Nils had brought him from Polynesia. Around the wall, near the ceiling, were iron wood bows and arrows which he had picked up in a junk store. In the far corner of the room on the floor a squat drum sat and contemplated itself in a full length dressing mirror.

The only modern notes were his bed, but that was hidden beneath a feather cape which Nils had brought from another jaunt, and a wire recorder on the floor near the drum. It jarred with the rest of the ornaments but it had its function, Boyce thought wryly.

Emptying his pockets of the herbs, he ripped open the covering on the autoclave and allowed the rooster to step out of the bag. He had already bought a scalpel and rubber gloves. His preparations were almost at an end. The rooster walked around the room on stiff legs, prepared at any moment to do battle royal with an enemy if one could be found.

Boyce paid it no attention as he lined up the scalpel, the surgical scissors and the rubber gloves. Alcohol? Did he have any? He hurried to the medicine chest. Of course he did. What was up? Was he trying to avoid putting an end to his delaying? A psychiatrist, he thought, would assume he was avoiding that which he wanted to do. But then a psychiatrist would never have approved of the way he was letting his fantasy life overlap onto reality. . . .

ALCOHOL . . . and what else? The flowering twig in the bell jar. He pulled the glass hemisphere out from under his bed and placed it on the raffia

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rug. The glass cast odd reflections on the little brown twig. The tender shoots of green seemed rusted, dying. He lifted the bell jar. The green recaptured itself. It had just been imagination. The twig was fresh and had green leaves as was necessary.

Glancing around him he added up what was necessary. The dirt. Plugging the autoclave into the wall, he filled the base of it with water and set it going. The steam would soon begin to do its customary job of sterilizing whatever was placed into the instrument. He poured the dirt from the graveyard into the gleaming metal sterilization device.

Better give that about ten minutes he thought. He did have the whim-whams he decided as he realized he had forgotten to place the scalpel in the autoclave. He did so, cursing himself for cowardice. Would Nils dilly-dally this way? Never. But then of course Nils didn't believe in what he was trying; he sneered at it as a matter of fact. It was the sneering and the sarcasm in Nils' voice that had made him decide to try it.

The wire recorder came next. He flicked on the switch. Better adjust the power or those booming jungle drums would have his landlady on his neck in no time flat. He turned down the gain. Now the roaring of the deep throated drums was just a mumble. But he had listened to the recording so often that all he needed was the mumble to act as a mnemonic. The sound no longer filled the room, but, and this was more important, it filled his mind.

Nils had made the recording at what he called the most exciting native rite he had ever witnessed. If the drums were any indication it must have been quite an experience for after they had rumbled for a while one began to feel the blood in one's body beating in sympathy, one's head banged in unison with the boomlay, boomlay, click. . . .

Setting a dish on the floor he poured the herbs onto the center of it. He dribbled the odd smelling condiments through his fingers, bruised them between thumb and forefinger till his room began to smell like an equatorial native hut. Then he set fire to them, and as they began to swirl up in pungent clouds, he hurried to the autoclave. He donned the rubber gloves and picked up the scalpel.

The smells from the plate had disturbed the rooster. Stiff-legged it walked towards the fuming dish. Behind the red feathers of its tail the bell jar distorted the bird's shape into something oddly obscene. Boyce could no longer see the twig under the glass.

With the drums beating into his innermost consciousness, with the assorted odors penetrating his nose, with his blood pounding in his veins he forced down a shudder of revulsion and grabbed the rooster around the neck with one hand.

Using the surgical scissors he did what had to be done, not liking what he was doing, fighting off waves of nausea. The bird's blood and entrails made the flame from the herbs gutter out. The smell became actively unpleasant. He stooped, got down on his hunkers, squatted on his heels like the native he was imitating.

Turning from the plate, he cast the entrails over his left shoulder as was prescribed. Simultaneously he began the chant which made his palate dance up and down because of the unaccustomed strain he was putting on it. The drums, the chant, the smell, all combined into an unpleasant whole. But unpleasant or not he had determined to do what was necessary. Glancing at the entrails, which had formed into a shape which a vivid imagination might have been able to imagine as being the crux ansata, he got to his feet.

II

STEAM poured out into the room from the autoclave. Ripping his shirt off he threw it to his bed. He avoided looking at himself in the long mirror to his right for a variety of reasons, the paramount one being that he did not

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A warm glow of light issued from the center of the womb-like area

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want to see how silly he was afraid he would look.

Naked to the waist, sweating from the unaccustomed task, he looked down at the graveyard dirt. Picking it up in one hand, he forced himself to face the mirror. No sense in spoiling it all now, he thought.

He bit his lip as he placed the edge of the scalpel next to his left nipple. He couldn't do it. Maybe the alcohol would dull it a little. He splashed the fluid all over his chest. Then he again pressed the more-than-sharp razor edge into the flesh next to his nipple. Now! He had to look at himself in the mirror to see what he was doing. His ordinary face surmounted by light-colored hair, his blue eyes, squinted a little from too much poring over micro-films stared back at him. He drew himself up to his full five feet nine inches, threw his shoulders back, and taking a deep breath, he forced himself not to think about the pain. Straining to make his ears hear nothing but the rumble of the savage drums he ripped his hand across his chest. The scalpel left a red runnel from his left nipple to his right.

There. That hadn't been so bad. Setting the scalpel a little lower he ripped again, and again, and again. His whole chest was like a red washboard when he finished.

But the end was not yet. Rubber covered finger tips held the top incision open as with the other hand he scooped up some of the sterile dirt. He rubbed it into the incision. Then he pressed the lips of the cut together over the dirt. Four more times he repeated the stereotyped series of maneuvers.

Then, reeling a little, he ripped off the gloves, threw them into the autoclave, and squatted on his heels again.

Throwing his head back he chanted. At first he was out of phase with the beat of the drums but gradually, as he wavered back and forth on his heels he got his voice to synchronize with the monotonous beat.

It was almost done.

He had not dared in all that time to look at the bell jar. But now that it was over, now that he had made the blood sacrifice of the rooster, now that he had made painful oblation to that which he was trying to reach, he glanced at the jar.

It was hard to see through the glass. His eyes were watering from the smell of blood and from the pain. Continuing the chant, he walked, still on his heels, like a crippled animal, towards the bell jar.

Complete and utter failure faced him. Inside the glass jar the twig lay, brown with green leaves, little buds beginning to sprout.

He felt like a complete idiot. All that pain, all that trouble and nothing had happened. He let himself fall from his heels to his behind and just sat in the center of the room. The drums continued their muttering. The smell was as omnipresent as ever. But his theory had been kicked into a cocked hat.

For if he had been right in what he had deduced, the twig should have changed, should have been transformed into something living. He had cut himself to ribbons, forced dirt into open wounds only to be faced by a twig.

It was funny in a way....

HE LEAPED to his feet. That knock on the door. He looked around wildly. Now of all times when his experiment had been a failure, he did not want Nils to see what he had done. It would be hard enough to bear his ridicule when he was told about it, let alone to have him see all the absurd preparations.

Kicking things under the bed, turning off the wire recorder took only a second. The knocking was louder now. Nils was an impatient type.

To think that he had expected to bring a twig to life. What an imbecile! He looked around. The plate; he kicked that under the bed. The blood, the rooster's blood on the rug! He picked it up and turned it over. The blood blend-

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ed with the design and was no longer visible.

What else? Himself. His bloody chest! He grabbed a bathrobe from the closet and yelled out in answer to the repeated knocking, "Hold your rockets! I'm coming!"

As he walked to the door he realized he had forgotten one thing. The glass bell jar and its tell-tale twig. He turned from the door as Nils yelled, "Come on, I haven't got all day, open up."

His heart stood still as he looked down at the bell jar. The twig was gone. In its place there was a brown and green object of the same general size and shape. But it was alive. And it was evil.

It was a krait. A live and venomous snake!

Pushing the bell jar under the bed, restraining a shudder at the horror of the little snake, Boyce hurried back to the door. It had been Nils who had been kiddingly impatient to get the door opened, but it was Ilse whom Boyce saw first.

All the crowded jumble in his mind eased away as he stood motionless for a moment contemplating her calm beauty. Tall as he, imperious to a degree, her black hair oddly contrasting with her blue, blue eyes, aquiline nose warring with the softness and fullness of her wet sweet mouth, her face combined strength of mind with a kind of beauty that moved him deeply. Full busted and narrow waisted, round hipped and long legged, she was to him everything a woman should be.

He gulped, which was his usual response to her overwhelming femininity. Then, slowly raising his eyes from hers, he saw his friend behind her. A head taller than Ilse, Nils grinned with rakehell delight and said, "What in the world or out of it, were you doing in there? We could hear drums, but that was all!"

"C'mon in." Then, in answer to Nils, "I was just listening to that recording you brought back from South America."

"I sometimes think," Nils said, entering the room and dwarfing it and its occupant with his presence, "that civilized men should not listen to those drums. There's a danger that it may arouse atavistic. . . ."

Ilse smiled. "In Harry?"

"I'll admit," Nils nodded, and eyed her neck, "that Harry seems less likely to have the beast in him aroused than almost anyone I can think of offhand."

"Sit down," Harry Boyce was ill at ease as pain began to work itself up his ravaged chest. "Make yourselves at home." Why had Nils brought Ilse here? Didn't he know how jealous he was of Nils having her for a mistress? Or was he just being a dog in the manger? For surely no single woman had ever occupied him to the exclusion of at least one or two others. As a matter of fact, he had bragged one time about what he called the Nils Engstrand system, the A-B-C system or blueprint for Don Juans. A was a woman whom he was softening up to a mood of receptivity. B was the mistress of the moment and C was the ex-B who had been mistress but was being eased out. This meant that at all times A was about to become B, B was on the way to becoming C and C was on her way out of his life.

Such a system, Boyce thought wistfully, did demand certain appurtenances and Nils had them all. He was the teevee hero made manifest, the male animal, from the tips of his big feet to his shock of almost red hair, from his lopsided grin to his casual air, he was the stud if there ever was one.

Ilse threw herself on the bed and he could not help worry whether the krait could escape from the bell jar. It seemed unlikely, but then its appearance had been quite unlikely too.

Timorously he said, "Ilse, wouldn't you be more comfortable on the drum? I use it for a chair all the time."

"Don't shock Harry's tender sensibilities, darling," Nils smiled. "After all he sleeps on that bed . . . and we won't investigate the subterranean

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depths of his mind at the moment but perhaps you are interfering with his dream girl. . . ."

She smiled and rolled over on her back and stretched her arms up over her head. Her breasts rose even higher and the sight of them made the pain in his chest ease a little. She said, "Let me tell you laddies, Ilse, the girl physio-therapist is one tired kid."

"Oooh," Nils mocked, "didums have a hard day at the looney bin?"

ENGSTRAND'S harsh insensitivity grated at times and this was one of them. Looney bin indeed! Maybe it was just the reaction to the mumbo-jumbo and his serrated chest but Nils was getting on his nerves. He wished Nils would go . . . he even wished she would go so that he could take a palliative.

But they showed no signs of having any such intention. Nils said, "What'll we do tonight? Get drunk, tour the city? See a show . . . or tour the city, getting drunk in the process and then see a show?"

"Or see the show and then get drunk?" Ilse asked. "All your plans seem to include that so why don't we take it for granted?"

Boyce slumped down on the drum. He was suddenly tired out. His plans did not include drinking, or travelling or anything but bed. He said, "Why don't you include me out of the plans tonight? I have a big day at the office tomorrow."

Nils scowled at him. "Since when?"

He felt dopey, heavy, the reaction was really setting in. "Since when what?"

"Since when do you work on Saturday?" Nils was looking at him, at his chest, at the dressing gown. . . .

Ilse suddenly sat up. She had seen what had caught Nils' eye. She said, "Shall we call a doctor?"

The room began to waver, the hard lines of the angles at the corners of the room were softening, blurring, he felt as though his head were stuffed with cotton batting. Suddenly he slumped forward.

Nils sprang to his side and picked him up in his arms as though he were an ungainly infant. Ilse said, and it was not a question. "That's blood seeping through the cloth, isn't it."

Nils nodded. He laid Boyce out on the bed and pulled the cloth off the unconscious man. Ilse swayed next to him. She asked, "Who could have done this to him? What brute? What sadistic monster?"

"I'm afraid the monster is Harry himself. Look . . . here . . . near his nipple the cut is deepest there on the left side and gets more shallow as it goes to the right. That looks self-inflicted to me."

She said, "Nils, he isn't unbalanced is he?"

"Curiously enough, in his own way, I think Harry is one of the sanest guys I know."

Sanest guys I know, sanest guys I know, sanest guys I know! The mist was clearing a little. He could sense humans near him, feel their worry as though it was a living thing. He opened his eyes and felt immediately better. Ilse was bent over him and her concern for him warmed him, chased away the cool depths that had held him.

"He just fainted from loss of blood," she said.

"Or loss of something else—" Nils answered.

"What do you mean?" She was curious.

But that was the point at which he opened his eyes wide and said, "Could I have a drink of water please?"

She held the glass under his chin and the feel of her, the smell of her was good. He said, "Sorry."

Nils said, "Is that all you mean to say about the whole thing?"

Was it? Was there any point in telling what he had done . . . and why? "Yes, I'm sorry I fainted." He was too, it seemed quite unmanly.

They propped him up on the bed and Ilse dragged the drum to the side of the bed and sat there, her hand on his fore-

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head. There wasn't much room for Nils' long legs to stretch out, but he essayed it by pacing back and forth in a tiny area. Three steps one way, two the other and then back again.

PROPPED up as he was, with the dressing gown pulled away from his chest and his head at an angle, all he could seem to look at were the bloody runes he had carved there. Ilse and Nils were looking at the same thing.

"As long as he's going to be thick, let's see if we can figure out what pinhead has been up to. From the smell in the room which I haven't gotten a noseful of since I was in the tropics last, and from the natty little handiwork that he's been scrimshawing on his hollow chest I would say that he's just come of age in New York instead of Samoa. . . ."

"Puberty rites?" she asked incredulously.

Nils nodded his big head. "What else?"

"All right, all right," Boyce said irritably. Why wouldn't they go so he could think about the bell jar? "You know what I've always wondered about."

"Maybe Nils does, but I don't," she said.

"If you read enough about primitive people, about their rites, magical and otherwise, you begin, after a while, to see a pattern." His voice was getting stronger. The blood was coming back into his head.

"Harry saw a pattern that no anthropologist ever has," Nils added. "Whether the pattern means anything or not. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"That's what I had to find out. If you strain all the mumbo jumbo away and just look for parallels between all the rites of all the different primitives, be they Melanesian, African, Haitian, or whatever, you begin to see what I think is a formula . . . a scientific formula."

"Sheer nonsense of course," said Nils in an aside to the girl.

"Nonsense or not," he quelled the desire to flaunt the krait in Nil's face, "I wanted to find out if my synthesis made any sense. I reasoned that the things that all magic have in common are, excitement of the nostrils by strange smells, because the most primitive part of us is the smell brain. Sound, repetitious and numbing sound, to act on the ears. Blood to focus the eyes . . . and death and pain for some reason whose significance escapes me."

"So you went through the synthetic witch doctorship and—" Nils' smile aggravated him.

"It was more than that, because I had to be the witch doctor and the acolyte at one and the same time. I thought that if as civilized a people as the Jews still kept a puberty rite in their religion I had better have a bar mitzvah in my ceremony."

"But there's no blood and pain in Judaism," Ilse said.

"No, of course not, but there is in all the primitive religions. And there may well have been two or three thousand years ago in Hebrew lore; after all Abraham used a scape-goat you remember."

"The hell with all this," Ilse said suddenly. "You need a doctor for that chest of yours."

He looked down at the red ruin of his flesh and shook his head no. "I took precautions, and I have some anti-biotics if I need them. Any doctor would turn me over to the cops . . . or I might be sent over to your little establishment, Ilse."

"True," Nils said. "Now that you've gone through all the mumbo-jumbo and nonsense, what have you discovered? That I was right and you were wrong, that there is nothing involved but mass stupidity, superstition and—"

"Hold it!" Boyce found his voice was getting stronger. "Look under my bed. There's a bell jar there. Be careful when you drag it out. I think it'll surprise you."

He waited.

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III

ENGSTRAND lifted the coverlet and getting on his knees peered under the bed. Then he pulled the bell jar into view. Ilse gasped, as she saw what it contained.

"When I started the ceremony that . . . was a twig."

Nils looked at the tiny, venomous reptile for a long minute. "You feel that your incantations and all the rest of it changed a twig into that krait?"

Boyce nodded.

Ilse looked at Nils. Engstrand sat on his heels and watched the six inches of sudden death as it coiled lazily on itself. "There are two possibilities here, of course." Nils voice was cold. "Either you have deluded yourself to the point where you were able to forget that you bought the snake and substituted it for the twig, if there ever was a twig . . . or. . . ."

"Or I am telling the truth, which I am!" It was hard fighting with Nils.

"No, that was not the alternative I had in mind. Or, you deliberately are attempting to hoax me, which I don't like!"

"Nils," there was pleading in his voice which *he* didn't like, "I wouldn't do such a thing. You know damn well that I am after something a lot bigger than this, which is merely a kind of parlor trick. You know that I—"

"I know that you've gotten cracked on one subject from thinking about it too much. I know that a man your age shouldn't be a virgin. I know that when a man turns in on himself as you have, shutting himself off from reality, getting embroiled in a hobby like this, he loses contact." Nils strode to the door. "Come on Ilse, let's leave Harry to his peculiarities."

"No, Nils. I don't think I shall."

What was this? Ilse challenging Nils? Why? Could it be that. . . .

The door slammed shut behind Engstrand.

He looked at her. She returned his gaze calmly and then reaching out a tentative toe pushed the bell jar back out of sight. She said, "Nils gets a little too hair-on-the-chest for me sometimes." She paused, then said, "Not all women want to be ordered around all the time."

"Ilse," he wanted her so desperately that his throat threatened to close up, "you believe me, don't you?"

"I believe you think that a twig changed into a snake." She looked at his face carefully, as though savoring it. Suddenly she bent down and kissed him gently on the lips. There was no sex in the kiss, it was, if anything, comforting. She whispered, "You have a nice ordinary face, a real nice one. I think I like ordinary faces."

It hurt his chest to move his arms, but he moved them. He couldn't press her to his chest but he ran his hands over her hair, down her cheeks to her throat. He let his hands rest there, caressing the column of her neck. He said, "Are you and Nils—"

She frowned, a tiny momentary grimace and said, "Let's not talk about him. He and I . . . as a matter of fact, I have wondered why he has wooed me so passionately up to a point and then. . . ."

"You're right," he said, the smell of her in his nostrils, "let's not talk about him." His hands ran off her throat down her body as she sat up and retreated a little from him.

"Are you sure," she asked, "that there's nothing I can do about your wounds?"

"Positive." Better talk about the weather, or his experiment. "Look, Ilse, you must believe me. I put a twig under that glass jar and then went through my mumbo-jumbo. It was the incantations, the series of operations that caused the transmutation. I know it was. It was a sign that I was on the right track."

"No conceivable coincidence would account for it, that's sure." She seemed to believe him. "I gather from what you've been saying that your experi-

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ment is just the first step towards something else?"

"If I am right," now he could speak freely, this was his hobby horse which he had ridden for years, "if I'm right, there's something behind these parallels, there is a reason why all magic has certain elements in common."

"A reason?" The hollow at the base of her throat seemed made to be filled with kisses. He wrenched his eyes away from it and her. Yes, he thought, a big reason. Something that keeps pulling timidly at the edges of my mind like a sick child picking at his covers. How could he put it into words? The silly hunches? The odd unrelated things that had bothered him. How to word it? "Here it is 1985. Funny," he digressed, "I just recently ran across a book written in the forties called *1984*." He shuddered a trifle. "I'm glad the writer wasn't a true prophet; but all that to one side, here we are racing towards the twenty-first century and what has happened? The sciences have gradually slowed from their gallop to a trot and now they're creeping. There hasn't been a really major discovery since private industry swiped atomic power from the government." She tried to interrupt but he shushed her. "No, wait a minute. I know that there have been little odds and ends of advancement but there's been no huge world-shaking discovery and don't say that everything has been found out. Why, way back in 1962 they thought they were on the track of a real theory of gravitation . . . what happened to it? What happened to the men's minds who had thoughts like that?"

"The big thing," she said, "is probably that we're slowed down by the need of some huge coordinating machine. There's too much knowledge now for one man or a hundred men to force into their brains . . . and besides, the depression of 1965 stopped everything cold, scientists or laymen."

BUT that was a generation ago! Why when I got out of high school they had just made the first trip to the moon. They thought then that Mars was only ten years away. And what's happened?"

"Mmm. . ." she said thoughtfully, and the sound made her lips purse so that it was all he could do to keep from biting them. "Ten trips altogether and then the government decided it was costing more money than it was worth. Oh, I know what you mean: we do seem to have slowed down, but perhaps it's just the pendulum swinging a little. And then this waiting for the Fourth World War has tied things up. Good God," she said angrily, "wouldn't you have thought that the last one would have stopped wars for good and all?"

"It might have if the stalemate over atom bombs hadn't made war return to the days of attrition. Funny, all the predictions I've read about that Third War and all of them wrong. Both sides so afraid of the frightfulness of the weapons on the other side that it turned out to be just a shooting war."

"Just!" She was indignant. "Five million dead and you say just a shooting war."

"You know what I mean. Bullets and t.n.t. instead of atoms and bacteria."

"What's all this ancient history got to do with you chopping your chest into mincemeat?"

Everything and nothing. Just his feeling that mankind was quagmired in a slough not of its own making. His idle thoughts, vagrant hunches, unrelated, perhaps undigested ideas. He shrugged, "Maybe I'm all wrong. Perhaps it was just the weight of undigested and uncoördinated scientific knowledge that was holding everything almost at a standstill. But on the other side of the scale was the ever increasing, every day more frightening statistic on the rising rate of insanity in the world.

"Your work," he said, "don't you ever get the feeling that all the world is a madhouse. . . ."

She looked at him gravely. "Yes. You can't do the kind of work I do with-

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out getting down in the dumps, without feeling every once in a while that. . . ."

He waited, holding his breath. Would she put it into words?

She went on, "That we are rats in a cage being driven mad so that someone can write down in a little notebook precisely what the mechanisms of man are, and how they can be destroyed."

He let his breath ease out. That was it. "Now you have my basic idea."

She had continued her line of thought without speaking. His voice jarred on her thoughts. She said, "What?"

" 'All the world's mad, but me and thee . . . and sometimes I have me doots about thee . . .!"

She smiled. "That's the way we all feel at one time or another I guess."

He lowered his eyes from the "v" of her bosom. He said, "That snake in the jar, if I am right, is the first hint that mankind has ever had that. . . ."

She was looking down at the floor. Her voice was soft when she said slowly and deliberately, "Harry, you're right, whatever you think, you're right."

He was puzzled but not for long. For she had lifted the glass into view and pulled her hands away. The brown and green twig was all that the glass contained. This change, because of its unexpectedness, because it made no sense at all, frightened him in a way the first one had not.

He drew away from the twig as she had done.

The fear bit deep into his bones. He felt alone in the face of he knew not what forces. He was barely aware of the fact that he had returned to childhood. For he had buried his face in her breasts and was drawing strength from them.

There was something almost incestuous in the way he made love to her for it was clear that it was fear that was driving him, that in sex he was returning to the womb, that he was hoping

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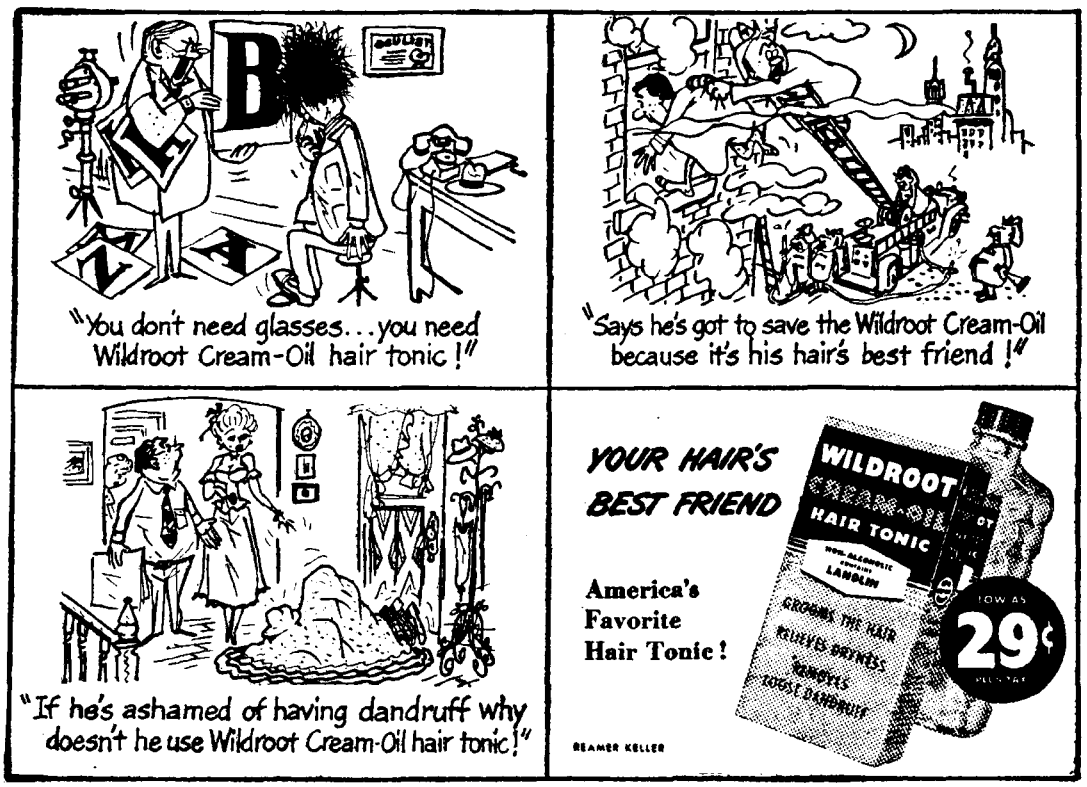
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that the euphoria of sex would drive away the clamor of fright that hammered at him.

LATER, when they were smoking, he said, "I'm glad now that I never knew a woman before."

Her lids, deep blue, almost black now, lifted and the corners of her eyes lifted a little in a smile. "Vice versa."

A tiny tendril tugged at the back of his mind. She had been telling the truth about her relation with Nils. She too had been virginal. Why then had Nils lied? Was it just normal male boasting? Or was there another reason?

She said, "This twig-snake business has given me the courage to bring something into words that I have never verbalized before."

He waited. Strength surged back into him. It had been even more wonderful than his wildest imaginings. He felt calm, sure, all the things that had never been his now seemed possible.

She went on, "I've often wondered about catatonia."

"Wait a minute," he said, "my hobby is witchcraft and primitive religion, not psychiatry. Are catatonics the ones who freeze in whatever position they're in and stay that way?"

She nodded and her hair brushing against his bare shoulders felt good. She said, "There is no way of establishing rapport with them when they're in their deep freeze. Part of my job is massaging them so that when they come out of it their muscles aren't too crippled."

He pulled the smoke of his cigarette down deep into his lungs. Only half his mind was on what she was saying. The other half was being quietly amused about the fact that his puberty rite had been properly consumated. Today I am a man, he thought happily. . . .

But she was saying, "There's a teenaged 'schizo' that I take care of. Ruth is a sweet kid when she's not in catatonia. She has been standing on one leg like a crane for three days now. It was when I was massaging her that it came again. . . .

"It's happened before. But never like this. As I ran my hands down her poor taut spine I suddenly felt as if someone had trepanned my skull and stuck a finger into my brain."

"What?" The ease and peace was draining away.

"That's not right of course, but there's no other way of saying it. There are no words for the way I felt. Except . . . imagine a trap door opening in your head and something pressing against it. But that wasn't all. If that had been it I would have suspected a brain tumor and had an examination . . . it got worse. I felt that someone was rifling the filing cabinets of my memory. Reading them, remembering them . . . and worst of all changing some of them. I felt that if I could get my hands off Ruth the feeling would go away. But I could not let go."

He looked at her. The memory was disturbing her deeply. If only he could wave a magic wand and make it go away. If only. . . .

She said, "And then suddenly I could let go and when I took my hands away Ruth was unfrozen. She was better than she's been in the two years she's been in the hospital."

"The laying on of hands."

"That's what some of the other poor patients thought. They crowded around me, wanted to touch me . . . as if I could help them." She made a face. "I felt that I needed help after what had happened to my brain."

A twig that changed into a snake, and a catatonic brought back from living death by the touch of a hand. A woman whose brains were picked, and a man who was afraid of the magic he had wrought.

A poor pair, he thought hopelessly. His face reflected what he felt and she shared it. Suddenly they clung together like frightened children, each trying to draw some measure of strength from the other. . . .

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IV

WHEN the euphoria of sex wore away his chest hurt much more terribly than he would have believed possible. Ilse saw what he was suffering. "This is silly," she said, "there's no reason for you to be in pain." She went into the bathroom. He lay in bed and listened to her bustling about the place. A glass of water in one hand, the other palm turned up with sleeping pills on it, she walked back to the side of the bed.

"Take these and let's have no more nonsense." She said almost fiercely.

He obeyed since there seemed to be no alternative. His head fell back against the pillow. She bent over him and her lips brushed against his forehead. "I love you." Her whisper was low, but her words were as heartening as the blast of trumpets.

He smiled at her. A warm sleepy heaviness was washing over him. She pulled the drum next to the bed and sat there, waiting for sleep to come to him.

"Ghovind Dhas." He said slowly.

"What kind of double talk is that, darling?"

He manufactured saliva in his mouth before he could speak again, his mouth was dry, he was two steps from heavy sleep. "Ghovind Dhas."

"Honey," her voice laughed, "maybe you think you're making sense but it sounds like double talk to me. Go to sleep."

Go to sleep. It was imperative that he obey her, but it was equally imperative that he remember when he awoke what he had just said. . . .

When his eyes opened he was panicky. Something had happened, something terrible. Horrible oppression washed over him in dark waves. But the feeling vanished when he saw that Ilse was coming into the room, shower bath fresh, healthy skin glowing, a towel wrapped around her sketchily, revealing more than it concealed.

She bent over, kissed him on the lips and said, "Time for the sleeping beauty to get up."

She had stayed with him all night. The morning sun smashed in through the window and tore at his drug heavy eye lids. "Ilse," he mumbled, his mouth stiff, his throat sandpapered, "Ilse . . . what was I saying last night when I passed out?"

"Double talk, darling. It sounded like Going Dar . . . Going there . . . something like that."

He sat bolt upright in bed, his tortured chest sending premonitory jets of pain through him. He disregarded the pain and said, "Ghovind Dhas!"

"That sounds like it," she nodded. "What is it, a patent medicine?"

"Up to a certain point he was my mentor in matters metaphysical."

"Darling can you avoid alliteration? It's too much for me this early in the morning."

"He is supposed to be one of the three or four greatest experts in the world on my hobby. He knows everything there is to know about folklore, witchcraft, native superstitions. . . ."

"Yes?" She was getting dressed while he spoke.

"He knows everything there is to know . . ." He paused, "and believes none of it."

"Why was it so important that you remember that?"

Yes. Why was it so important? Last night as he had fallen off to sleep it had suddenly seemed vital that he get in touch with his Hindu friend immediately. Today, this morning, it still seemed like a good idea, but the feeling of frightening urgency was missing.

TODAY was Saturday. He had the whole week-end to devote to an attempt to solve that which he must solve. He glanced at the bell jar. The twig, that piece of once living matter, was just a twig. But he wondered if he would ever be able to look at a tree again without seeing its branches suddenly becoming imbued with life, without a paralyzing fear that each of its

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twigs had within it some kind of sentience.

Rising from bed entailed a lot more pain than he had bargained for, but biting his bottom lip until his teeth ground into it, he managed to get to his feet. Ilse had a tray next to his bed. On it was a change of dressing.

Paying no attention to his murmured objections, she took off his bandages, washed his chest clean, and changed the dressing. With the dried blood removed, the affected area was not quite so touchy. He had her pull the bandages tight because the pressure seemed to diminish the pain.

She helped him to dress. "What's on the schedule?" She asked looking up at him.

"Breakfast, then a fast trip to see Dhas."

She hooked her arm through his which made him feel strong enough to try and stare down his landlady. If only luck was with him, and they could get out of the house without encountering her basilisk stare. . . .

It was not to be. They left his room, got down the first flight of stairs safely, but in the foyer they encountered his nemesis. Hands on hips, frizzy hair making an unholy halo around her too fat face, sagging breasts distorting a too tight dress, his landlady waited.

"Well!" The single word was at one time a declarative, an imprecation, and an invitation to lie.

But with Ilse near him, not all the Mrs. Grundys of the world were too much for him. He snarled, "Well, what?"

The landlady was a trifle taken aback. She knew Harry Boyce as a mild, easily dominated young man. He was not staying in character and she was a little hurt. "After all," she said.

"Why don't you shut up?" Harry asked nastily, "and keep out of my room in the future. If I find you've been snooping around there again I'll move out so fast it'll make your hair curl! Come on, Ilse."

He stalked off with his arm around Ilse's waist. He felt about ten feet tall, and as though he was walking on air. Behind the couple the landlady stood stock still for a moment, then shook her head as though to clear it. It was a fine state of affairs, she thought irritably, when a nice young man like that one got out of hand! Wondering what had come over Boyce, she left the foyer and went back to her more concierge-like duties. But she was unshaken in her determination to take a look in his room and find out why he had told her not to go there. . . .

IN THE restaurant Ilse looked at him and smiled. "That took a lot of nerve didn't it?"

"What?" He pretended ignorance.

"Standing up to your landlady that way." The corners of her mouth were turned up.

"Not at all. Not at all." Then he stopped lying and grinned as he said, "I never thought I'd have the guts! I guess you're good for me."

She squeezed his hand, and he didn't pull it away, not even when the waitress glanced at their hands and then looked away.

"Your order?" The waitress was very distant.

"I guess a steak for breakfast would be a little outlandish," Harry said.

"Not at all." Ilse was as brazen as he. "Order me some juice, some eggs and coffee. Lots of coffee."

They ate heartily. Ilse said, "After we visit your Hindu friend, Harry, I think there's something else we should investigate."

"Umm?" His mouth was too full of food to articulate.

"Perhaps there is some clue, some idea that you can get at the hospital. Perhaps I'm too close to see something that is self-evident. Something that you would spot, as an outsider."

"Could be." He lit a cigaret. The combination of Ilse, food and the first puff of a morning cigaret succeeded in

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chasing away the cobwebs. He felt ready to do battle with giants.

He finished eating first and, rather than wait for Ilse to finish her food, he excused himself and went to the videophone. He dropped three credits in the slot and pressed the proper sequence of buttons. A moment later Ghovind Dhas appeared as large as life. A huge smile almost split the Hindu's leathery face in half. His eyes jittered open and closed and Harry noticed, as he had before, how Dhas seemed to roll and jerk his head from side to side and blink his eyes so much that in a short while his voice seemed unimportant as a means of communication. In no time at all Dhas' voice would get lower and lower till he almost spoke by means of tics, and gestures, like dots and dashes.

"My friend," the Hindu said and his voice was warm.

"Hi." Harry paused, wondering what exactly he should say, then equivocated. "Dhas, how about your time? Are you free to see a friend of mine and me?"

"For you my time is always open." The stereotyped sequence of head jerks, facial tics and blinking eyes suggested that Dhas would drop the cares of the world at any time for his friend Harry Boyce.

"Good. We'll be right out." Harry smiled goodbye and Dhas' face drifted away, the screen gradually cleared and visual retention made Harry feel that Dhas' smile was lingering on and on like the Cheshire cat's.

He stepped out of the booth and turned to go for Ilse. All the good feeling that had succeeded in taking him out of himself drained away.

She was not alone.

Nils had swung a chair around till the back of it was to the front. He sat on it with his arms draped over the back, his legs lounging out in front of him. His big shoulders jutted out, completely hiding Ilse from Harry's view.

Harry took a deep breath and regretted it instantly. His chest felt as if it were being torn to shreds with a dull fork. How had Nils tracked them down, and why was he speaking in so confidential a tone to Ilse? All his previous feelings of jealousy about his girl and Nils returned augmented ten-fold. Then the wonder and the glory that had been his introduction to sex reiterated that there had been nothing between the two. If not sex, then what? Why was Nils always with Ilse . . . and why was he always surrounded by a bevy of women? What function did his harem serve if . . . Harry let the thought drift away but it was to return.

HE JOINED them and Nils grinned up at him. "Hello, Buster. How's the chest this morning?"

He grunted, "Pretty good," and sat down. Whatever Nils and Ilse had been talking about had ceased at his approach. The waitress was most solicitous of Nils. She bustled about, busying herself with water and silver and other odds and ends which she had left to the bus boy when Ilse and Harry had been her customers.

Nils winked her his thanks, then turned his attention to Ilse. "Were you able to get our boy wonder over the collywobbles?"

She nodded.

Nils turned to Harry. "How about you? Did sleep knit up the ravelled sleeve of care?"

Harry took a deep drag on the remains of a cigaret which now tasted like an old mattress and said, "If you mean by that, have I stopped believing the twig changed into a snake—no." In the face of Nils manifest disbelief he was loath to tell him about that other change . . . when the snake had turned back. . . .

But Ilse said, "You can be as superior as you want to, Nils, but the snake . . . changed back. . . ."

"No kidding!" Nils seemed delighted. "You mean *you* think you saw this wonderful transmogrification, too?"

Ilse and Harry said at once, "We saw it!"

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Nils put his head back and roared with laughter. "I would not have believed it! Not only has he managed to delude himself, but his delusion is strong enough to extend to another person! We'll be having mass hypnosis if this keeps up! This is another Hindu rope trick in the making!" His grin showed his almost too white, predatory teeth.

"Hindu rope trick," reminded Harry of his appointment. He said to Ilse, "Come on, we have to go see Ghovind Dhas!"

"That old bag of wind?" Nils said. "Come off it, Harry. Shake your brains together and start thinking again! How many times have I told you that Dhas is full of sound and fury."

"I wish you'd get off this Shakespearian kick," Harry said sourly. "Come, Ilse."

Nils walked with them to the cashier's desk. "Want me to pop you over there? I have my car."

Harry pointed back at the table. The pretty waitress was looking helplessly from the tray of food she had brought for Nils to Nils standing near the exit. "Better go back and cheer up your conquest, Nils."

Ilse said, "She looks heartbroken, better go back and eat."

"I can see I'm about as popular with you two as a bad case of the botts! I'll be seeing you." He waved goodbye and went back to his food. Harry watched the women in the restaurant perk up as Nils threaded his way between the tables. It was amazing to see the way Nils caused even the oldest woman to preen.

But, Harry grabbed Ilse's arm, she was his and the hell with Nils and his catnip-like effect on women in general. Outside he hailed a copter-cab.

The earth fell away from them. From above the slum in which he lived, the area around Fifth Avenue, seemed almost pretty. They looked down. Ilse had her arm clenched in his. The contact with her body, thrown together as they were in the back seat of the cab made him feel better. He was able to feel almost as well as he had earlier.

THEY were higher now. He said, still looking down, "What a fairyland the city must have been when men were still building towards the sky instead of spreading out in rabbit warrens the way we have to now."

"I've seen old pix of it." She nodded agreement. "There was one view that must have been thrilling, when you came into the port of New York, at the old section, down near the Battery."

"I know the one you mean, the whole city seemed to rear up out of the water, magically. The buildings seemed to be floating there. . . ."

"And now the big buildings are warehouses and that isn't very romantic."

He pointed out the back of the cab. "That one back there, the biggest one—" He was gesturing at what had once been called the Empire State Building. "That must have been exciting when it was going up."

"I wonder if we'll ever build up, again, toward the stars, instead of down, into caverns or out, in decentralized flat buildings—"

But that brought them back to the irresolvable problem of the bomb, so they dropped the matter by mutual, unspoken consent. Harry leaned forward and flicked on the video screen. The reception was perfect at five thousand feet. A children's program came on. Ilse and Harry leaned back, relaxed, and watched as a playlet was enacted. There were no props, no scenes, and the puppets, for it was a puppet play, were just paper bags placed over the puppeteers' hands. On the paper bag someone had scrawled indications for eyes, a nose and a blob of a mouth.

Despite the almost Japanese simplicity of the set-up, the action of the play made the puppets human. It was an enchanting little morality story, charmingly done. They watched in silence till the biggest paper bag, the giant, had

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been overcome by the bravery of a little bit of a paper puppet, then Harry sighed and turned off the machine.

"I wonder if even that'll do any good." He said.

"You mean trying to jog our children's imaginations by returning to simplicity? They have great hopes for it. It doesn't seem possible," she said thoughtfully, "that we almost bred imagination out of our people by making everything too real."

"It's not hard to believe if you go to the museum and see those old kinees where they did their best to make everything lifelike. And those old toys . . . why, when plastics came in, imagination went out. Toys did everything . . . dolls wept, had the usual bodily functions . . . cannons and planes, and rockets were all real down to the tiniest detail. No wonder kids stopped playing make-believe. They didn't have to when their toys were real. . . ."

"Maybe now when they have to try and visualize all the scenery and all the props it'll jog their latent creativity into action again."

"I hope so, but—" he stopped. The cab had come to rest in front of Dhas' museum. "Here we are." He helped her out, paid the cabby, and escorted Ilse into the tremendous building.

V

ALL AROUND them were reminders, not only of man's mortality, but of the peculiarity of the gods he had chosen to worship. The Museum of Anthropology was not one of the popular places for idlers to choose for a wasted day. Except for the guards, bored and somnolent, they were alone. The rising sun tried to penetrate the gloomy recesses, to brighten statues old as time and as big as men would have liked to have been. An occasional high light seemed maliciously to choose the most decadent of gods on which to shine. Ahead of them was an ancient god of fertility whose brazeness had always made Harry blush. It did again, but this time he hoped it was because of Ilse.

The stone and ivory statues glared down at them in an ancient phalanx as they made their way to the office. A tiny sign discreetly lettered, said, "Dr. Ghovind Dhas." After his patronymic there was an alphabet of honorary abbreviations.

Ilse read them and said, "Whew . . . this must be quite a boy!"

Harry opened the door and said, "He is. Hello there!"

Getting up from behind his desk, Ghovind Dhas seemed to be trying to stand on tip-toe, at least, he stood very straight as though any slouching was unforgiveable for a person four feet eleven and three quarter inches high.

"Harry!" He began his series of tics, moués and head movements.

"I want you to meet Miss Ilse Lattimore, Dr. Dhas."

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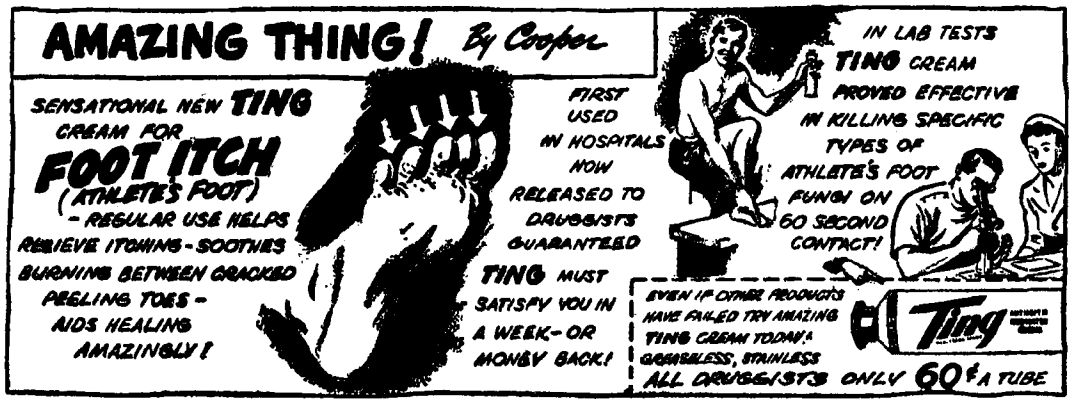
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Dhas made his way to her side, pumphandled her hand, grinned, rolled his head almost over onto his shoulder and said, "I am *so* pleased. You have no idea of how many times I have nagged Harry about his bachelorhood. Harry, I have said, man was not made to live alone. A phrase not of my coining, but true nevertheless."

"I'll wring your neck, Ghovind, if you don't stop that!" Harry was really blushing now.

The little man cackled and said, "Push something off the chairs and sit down."

The room, crowded from one end to the other with objets d'art, phallic symboys, small and medium sized gods of all kinds and descriptions was also inundated by pamphlets, manuscripts, and papers of every description. The chairs were piled high with papers; the floor was stacked with books.

Harry swept a chair clean for Ilse and then proceeded to pace back and forth. Dhas sat behind his desk, folded his little hands, smiled his big smile and said, "And now?"

AND now what? Where to begin? How to convey what had happened? What *was* the beginning? How had he become interested in folklore? Was that part of it? Or did it all start just yesterday? While he dithered in indecision, Ilse broke in on his train of thoughts.

She said, "Dr. Dhas . . . we're scared."

"Of what, my dear?" The little man was all concern.

Harry said, "Remember I said that one day I would test my theory about primitive rites, about witchcraft, and the rites of puberty?"

It was difficult to pick out the nods from all the other head twitchings in which Dhas indulged himself, but Harry by dint of long practice was able to see it.

"Well . . . yesterday. . . ." But he was still bumbling, afraid to say it out loud.

Ilse broke in. "He tried out his theory, doctor, and it was successful . . . in a way."

"Oh?" The little man's bright birdlike eyes opened in surprise.

"I . . ." Harry said, feeling like a fool, "I put a twig under a bell jar . . . then I went through what I felt was a synthesis of the basis of all witchcraft, of all the things that have caused demons to manifest themselves—"

There was a silence. The little man was bent forward, his hands clasped and unclasped. "You got a sign?" He asked at last.

"The twig," Ilse said, "changed into a snake. A krait."

"Very unpleasant little beast," Dhas said. "This was under controlled, laboratory conditions?"

"As closely as I could approximate them." Harry said, "There was no one near the bell jar, and yet the twig changed. Then later . . . it turned back into a twig."

The little man sighed. "Then there is no proof now that anything ever happened?"

Harry wondered, was it just his imagination, or was Dhas pleased? Why should he be pleased that there was now no evidence, no corroboration of the metamorphosis?

"No evidence at all." Ilse said. "Except that Harry saw the first change, and I was there with him when the snake became a twig again."

"I see," the Hindu said.

"Well is that all you're going to say?" Harry was a little indignant.

"What is there for me to say?"

"Are you surprised? Can you give me any clue as to what, if anything, it means? Am I right? Is there a codified sequence of actions through which one can go and so call on the unknown?"

Dhas picked up a jade feeling piece from the desk and ran his fingers over it sensually. "You know, Harry, that I am completely eclectic in my views. Pragmatic and eclectic. Now in view of that, what would you want me to say? I must say, sorrowfully, that I cannot

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believe anything but the evidence of my own senses and not even those under certain circumstances."

"Huh?" This was not going the way Harry had thought it would. "What do you mean you would not even believe your own senses?"

"I said under certain circumstances. While drunk, let's say . . .or drugged . . . or if I had a brain tumor for instance, I would expect to see apparations if the tumor pressed on certain sections of my cortex."

Waving his hands, Harry said, "But all that to one side. I wasn't drunk or doped . . . and I certainly don't have a brain tumor."

"How can one be so sure?"

HARRY refused to be swayed. "Oh stop it, Ghovind, you're grasping at straws to retain your celebrated pose of believing nothing. Even if there is something wrong with me, it would be pushing coincidence too far for Ilse to have something wrong with her simultaneously."

"Pah!" The little man waved Harry's objections away. "Coincidences are highly overrated. I would find it no more wonderful to see a cab with a license plate of one thousand and another parked right next to it bearing a license number one million than that any other two random numbers should be side by side."

This was completely irrelevant, Harry thought wonderingly. What was Dhas up to? This wasn't like his friend at all.

He stood up, said, harshly, "I'm sorry to have taken up your time, Dr. Dhas. Let's go, Ilse."

The little doctor popped to his feet. He said, "Harry, I have made you angry, I'm sorry. But . . . what would you have me say? That I believe you and by believing you give the lie to everything I have ever thought? All the things I have fought and worked to prove true? You are the one who has had the illumination, if that is what it was. Until I see some sign, I shall wander on, believing nothing but what I can see, and smell, and hear, and damn little of that until I have examined it with my reasoning powers.

"If you are right, if you have somehow contacted other-worldly powers, don't you see that it may mean that all the people who worshipped all these gods . . ." His little hands flew out in a gesture that encompassed all the statues, all the frozen stone images to which people had made obeisance since the dawn of recorded time . . . "were right! I would have to be terribly, terribly sure you were right before I could take that step."

"I see." Harry said mournfully, "I see that Ilse and I are alone in this." He turned to the girl. "There's no use in telling him what happened to you . . . no use at all."

Ilse said, "Then you too, Dr. Dhas, feel that Harry and I were self-hypnotized?"

"I know," said Dhas deliberately, "that two young people who have just fallen in love are not the kind of cold, calm researchers in whom I would place the greatest confidence."

"Come on Ilse." Harry repeated. "Maybe he and Nils are right. Maybe it's all made up of moonbeams and madness." He escorted her through the door and then looked back at the little doctor who was again ensconced behind his desk. "But it wasn't! That twig changed into a snake and back again! Think about it for a while, Ghovind. Maybe I'll be back with some proof that'll knock your pragmatism for a loop!"

"I hope you do, son. I hope you do." Dhas said loudly enough for Harry and Ilse to hear as they walked away. Then he thought to himself, "I wonder what *did* happen? Are they up to something?" He shook his head. "They wouldn't dare. They're too afraid of her . . . and I can't blame them. . . ." His eyes raised from his desk to a statue of blue Kali. Kali, her four arms decorat-

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ed with tiny skulls, her hideous face split by what looked like a frozen scream of sadistic delight, glared back at him, endlessly.

"They would never dare challenge her," he thought unhappily. "And as long as they fear and obey her, mankind will suffer on . . . and on . . . to the last day . . . split with schisms, torn by psychopathy, gutting each other with spite, harassed with fear, and held back by sickness."

He tore his gaze away from the statue's, but even after he went back to work he could feel the three little eyes of the statue boring into his head.

DEFLATED in spirit, aching with returned pain, Harry said, "Shall we forget the whole blasted thing, dear?"

She turned and faced him. Around them the world hurried on its way. People's faces, made haggard by the pull of gravity and the tearing fingers of their individual problems, incuriously passed the couple by.

Stepping closer to him, she put her hands on his forearms. "Harry, forget Nils, and your doctor friend. This is something we and only we can believe in. It's up to us to do what we can or put it in the back of our minds and try to forget it. But you know that won't work, for the rest of our lives we'll be plagued by curiosity. . . . you've opened Pandora's box, and you can't just close the lid and say, 'Hmmm,' and let it go at that."

"I—" Harry looked into her eyes and said, "You're right. "What's next on the jolly old agenda?"

"The hospital, I guess."

"Can you get me in?"

"Why not? I work there, don't I?"

The institution was not as depressing as he had feared it might be. So many of his opinions, he realized, were formed by his reading of old books. Lunatic asylums were no longer the horrible places that he had read about. No snake pit, this.

And then suddenly it was all he had read about and worse, much worse. For the clean cheeriness of the surroundings faded away when Ilse opened a door and he saw, in a long narrow room, an endless row of frozen women.

"Catatonics?" He asked, knowing that they were.

She nodded. "This is the room where I was working yesterday when I felt that terrible finger in my brain . . . here it was that the girl patient became sane under the touch of my hands. . . ."

So she was feeling the strain too, he thought, in some ways her experience had been much worse than his own . . . after all a twig changing into a snake would just lead one to think that one might be insane . . . but having a lunatic become well under the ministrations of your hands . . . that could make you feel that you were a god. . . .

THEY stood, frozen as the patients they were observing. Each of the women, young, old, pretty and hag-like, was poised as though a movie had suddenly turned into a still picture. Right next to him, a teen-age girl was standing on one foot. Her other foot was ten inches off the ground. Her hand reached out for a door knob but her fingers had never reached it. Before that, she had slowed down into the statuelike rigidity of her catatonia.

Others sat, hands and arms outstretched, not wavering from the odd postures that held them enthralled.

Harry felt he had to say something, however foolish. He said, "I wonder . . . the fairy tale of the sleeping beauty—"

"Yes?" Ilse asked curiously.

"Do you suppose that was a factual report of a specific court of old where catatonia gripped a large group of people and it was only when the prince entered that—"

He realized he was just burbling and stopped. He said, "The girl you cured wouldn't be in here would she?"

"No, I just wanted you to realize what it was that she had. Come."

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Leading him by the arm, Ilse took him out of the room where no sound was uttered, where no flickering eye revealed that life still surged in statue-still remnants of humanity.

In the hallway Ilse hailed a passing interne. "Hi, doctor."

The good-looking man smiled at her. "What's the good word, Ilse?"

"That patient of mine," she said, "Ruth Bartlet, may I see her?"

Silence, utter silence descended. The young doctor's face looked as frozen as one of the catatonics they had just seen. Finally he said, "Where you been, honey? She died—last night."

A twig that became a snake only to turn back into a twig and thus destroy all evidence. And now . . . death, the sure way to remove all evidence. Harry's mind slithered around trying to grasp at some straw that would allow him to go on thinking sanely.

Ilse said, "Oh." Her voice was flat. "What did she die of?"

"Beats me." The interne said equally flatly. "Nothing wrong we could see. There's an autopsy going on now, if you want to check on it. Doctor Bruine is doing the cutting up."

Medical humor, Harry thought, is always pretty bad. Then he chided himself for trying to change the direction of his thoughts. The whole thing was over now. No more snake, no more girl who had been cured of catatonia, no more evidence to support his theory that. . . .

But Ilse's voice interrupted him. "Come on, Harry."

VI

LATER, when he was alone in his room, Harry thought of that trip to the autopsy room. He lay on his bed, his face blank. Drawers. Like file drawers in an office, he thought. Only these were life size. Life size to hold dead bodies. Each drawer stuffed with something that had once lived and breathed and hoped and suffered.

The dead girl had once been like that.

But it was hard to believe it when you saw her, as he had, stretched out on the stainless steel of the table, harsh overhead light cutting down as sharply as the scalpel that was raping her brain. He was glad that he had not been there when they were cutting that circle around the top of her skull. Now at least, with the lid lifted and her sorry brain revealed, you could forget, or try to, that this had once been alive.

The doctor had not even looked up when they entered. Ilse had stood at his side, her arm around him, as though fearing that he would faint. They had stood there for what had seemed like ages.

Ilse had asked the physician who was doing the p.m. whether he had found out anything. The answer had been odd. "No," the doctor had said, "not really. And yet—" He had pointed with the tip of his scalpel at a specific area of the brain that lay in front of him. "And yet," he had repeated, "there is something odd about the frontal lobes. She never had a lobotomy or a lobectomy and yet—" He had shaken his head. Something was wrong and he could not put his finger on it.

Harry put his hands behind his head and considered a spot on his ceiling. The dead catatonic had never had a brain operation, there was no scar tissue, no healed proof of a probing knife ever having been inserted in her sick head, and yet— something had been done to her brain. Unless, and this the doctor had been very loathe to believe, unless, she had been born with some anomaly. He had been grasping at straws, Harry was sure of that.

His chest felt a little better as long as he didn't move around very much. He was glad and sorry that Ilse had insisted on going home. It would have been real fine if her head had been pillowed on his shoulder . . . if she too had been considering the spot on the ceiling. If she were there, Harry wondered, would she find that the spot could be made, by an effort of will to look like a dragon?

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The door trembled under a concerted assault. "Hey! Lemme in."

Harry got out of bed and opened the door. Nils stood there. Nils, bubbling with good health, and loud of voice. "Hiya kid."

"Shh," Harry said, "C'mon in before you wake up the neighbors."

"The hell with the neighbors. How you feelin', kid?"

It was good to see Nils, good to see someone who did not have the collywobbles. Good to see someone normal.

Harry got back on the bed and waved Nils to a seat on the drum.

"Ready to tell father all about it?" Nils said, and he looked worriedly at Harry.

Some of his old time feeling of cameraderie returned. He had never allowed himself to think that he hero worshipped Nils, although he did. It was good to have Nils with him, that was all he intended to think about the subject.

He groped for the proper words. "Nils . . . I . . ."

"Spit it out, what's . . . hey, has something else happened?" Nils leaned forward, worry lines wrinking his broad high forehead. "Something . . . real?"

Why not tell Nils? "After the snake business yesterday . . . Ilse told me about something that had happened to her."

"Yes?"

He went over Ilse's story, brushing it off, making it seem less important than he thought it really was. The story held Nils' attention.

When he finished, Nils asked, "The girl . . . the patient Ilse cured, what's happened to her? How is she today? Still better?"

"Better?" Harry laughed bitterly, "Depends on how you use the word. She's dead!"

WHAT the . . . Harry looked at his friend. Nils' face was corrugated with thought, and could that be fear on the man's face?

Harry said, "Nils, what is it?"

"How did she die? What did she die of?" All the flamboyance was gone. Nils was a worried man.

"They don't know. Ilse took me to the place where they were performing a post mortem. The doctor didn't really have the vaguest idea why the girl had died. She had been better, happy as could be, making plans to go home and pick up her life where it had left off before her insanity took her away from all that, and then, suddenly, in the middle of a meal, she keeled over."

"Was the autopsy over when you left?" Nils' voice was low. So low that Harry could barely hear him.

"No. Ilse stayed on to see what they'd find out."

Harry paused then said, "I came home to rest. The pain in my chest was bothering me."

"Call her up." Nils said angrily. "Call her and see if they've discovered any functional reason for the girl's death. Call her right now!"

Harry dialled the number wondering at the same time what had so upset his friend. He considered Nils. The man had lost some of his control. His face was working. Getting up from the drum he paced back and forth across the room.

Nils snapped, "Hurry it up."

"Hello? Will you connect me with the physical therapy room? Thanks. Ilse? What's happened, did they find anything to account for . . . no . . . I see. Nils is here and he asked me to check. Okay darling. See you." He hung up.

"Absolutely no functional reason for the girl's death."

Nils seemed divided between anger and what Harry thought must be fear. What could be causing this? Aloud, Harry said, "What is it Nils? I thought you weren't interested in—"

"Interested!" Nils almost spit the word out. "Interested! Listen, Harry, something big is in the wind. A storm is brewing."

"What in the world are you talking about?" This was a far cry from the man who had made fun of his hobby,

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the man who had tried to talk him out of following up on his hunch.

"I can't tell you right now, Harry. But, you do trust me? Don't you? I'm your friend, you know that?"

"Yes, Nils, you're my friend, but what about it?"

"Then see if you can talk Ilse into getting another catatonic." Nils sat back on the drum. He leaned forward towards Harry. His voice was low, but commanding. "Get Ilse to pick out another catatonic and get her out of the hospital. Take the patient somewhere that you can keep an eye on her at all times."

"Kidnap a lunatic? Have you gone crazy too, Nils?"

"Kidnap! Don't talk nonsense. Harry . . . you must do this!" Nils' face was set.

"But Ilse would never consent to do a thing like that."

"Try her, and see." Nils voice was grim. "Get a catatonic and," he snapped his fingers, "take her to my lodge. I'll get up there as soon as I can. In the meantime you two see what you can get out of the patient."

"Whoa," Harry said, "take it easy, Nils. Let's assume that I'm crazy enough to do what you suggest. Let's assume that Ilse is nuts too, what *can* we observe that trained men in a mental hospital would not have seen."

Nils clenched his fists. "Harry, please don't ask me. . . ." His tone changed. "Look, Harry you have a strength that I need."

Harry turned this over and over in his mind. He had a strength; he, the weakling, had a strength that Nils, the strong man wanted to use? What in the world was all this about?

"What strength?"

Becoming impatient, Nils said, "Harry, don't equivocate. Will you ask Ilse to do this? Will you take the patient to my lodge?"

Would he? If it would help to push away the nightmare clouds he'd do anything within his power. But what did Nils want?

"Nils, you must be more explicit. What are Ilse and I going to look for?"

Taking his hand out of his pocket, Nils threw a handful of keys on the bed. "Take the patient to my lodge. My car is outside. The keys for it are there, and so are the keys to the lodge. I . . . I'll get up there as soon as I can." Nils turned and went to the door. At the door he paused and said, "Don't fail me."

"But, Nils," Harry was desperate. "Answer me. What are we to look for?"

"Anything unusual," was all that Nils said as he closed the door behind him. "Anything . . . supernormal." The door closed.

HARRY looked at the keys. His whole world had been turned upsidedown. Nils pleading with him, was in its way as odd an occurrence as the twig changing into a snake. Nils talking about some strength of which *he* was the possessor was about on a par with a catatonic getting better under Ilse's ministrations.

Suppose he did what Nils had asked. How was he going to talk Ilse into kidnapping a sick person from the hospital? Later, looking back on it, he realized that he should have become suspicious at the ease with which that hurdle was cleared.

For when he called Ilse and outlined Nils' plan, Ilse's answer was, "If you think we should, we will."

The whole thing had worked out as though rehearsed in advance. He had driven Nils' car to the hospital, had poised it over the lawn. Ilse had lead a girl, a young frail girl out of one of the buildings towards the hovering car. No one had gainsayed them, no one had even looked at them, as Ilse lead the girl to the car. Of course, it was dark, and the attendants were all busy, but even so . . . there was something dreamlike about the ease with which they had kidnapped the girl.

Together, in the car, Harry had asked, "Everything go all right?"

Ilse had nodded. She was busy making the girl comfortable. "No trouble at all, Harry."

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Was there something odd about her tone? Harry wondered about it briefly and forgot it. He had the problem of guiding the car through the night to Nils' mountain retreat, a place to which he had only been once, and that once in the daytime.

But even that had been easy. The biggest problem, of landing in the darkness, was no problem at all. He made it as though he had been making blind landings all his life. Ahead, not ten feet away, was what Nils called his shack.

The key fitted the huge door that allowed them entrance to the broad, sprawling, comfortable living room. Once inside, once the young girl was made comfortable, Harry turned to Ilse. He said, "You know the law of diminishing returns has been repealed."

"Hmm? Ilse's attention was on the patient.

"You get prettier all the time."

"Not now, Harry." And this time her tone was cold.

Rebuffed, hurt, he turned to look at the insane girl. She was pretty too, but in a frail, unworldly way. Her thin skin showed pounding veins in her high forehead. Her too bright eyes were darting around the room, admiring it, appraising the contents, scanning the big comfortable chairs, the appurtenances that made Nils' claim of "roughing it" absurd.

"What's her name?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ilse said, "Leila, I want you to meet Harry Boyce. Harry, this is Leila Manton."

Harry pushed Ilse into an ante-room. "She seems perfectly normal."

Ilse nodded.

"Well then . . . will she be any good for what we want? Nils asked for a catatonic."

Ilse's clear eyes were on a level with his. "Harry, when I picked her out she was the worst of any of them. She had been frozen immobile for three days. When I touched her, she came out of it."

"It happened again." Harry said flatly. No wonder Ilse behaved oddly.

"The same thing. As she returned to consciousness I felt my brains being probed. Harry—" She threw herself in his arms. "I'm so scared I don't know what to do, I—"

IMPULSIVELY he pressed her to him. This time there was no pain to prevent him from doing a man-sized job of comforting. Finally he patted her shoulder ineffectually and said, "Let's get back to her."

Hand in hand, like two children, they returned to the living room.

Harry was instantly sorry that they had done so.

Leila had been about to flick on the teevee set that covered one whole wall. She had never finished the action. Frozen, she stood on one foot, the other reaching out for the floor it had never reached.

Ilse gasped and ran to the girl.

It was odd helping Ilse to lift the girl and place her on one of the big roomy couches. The girl was light, so fragile that it was like carrying a doll. Her immobility completed the illusion.

"Well," he said, and then cleared his throat because his voice had cracked, "Nils wanted a catatonic. We got one all right."

Ilse considered the girl. "Harry . . . I don't think I can go through that experience again. I don't think I'll stay sane if I feel someone rifling my brain. . . ."

Taking a deep breath, Harry thought, Nils said I had strength. Maybe I can give Ilse some of it. "Darling, try . . . if it gets too bad, I'm here . . . I'll do what I can."

He could see little bulges appearing in the hinges of Ilse's jaw. She was biting hard, trying to hold onto herself. Walking slowly towards the couch, her very back looking strained and worried, Ilse said, "I'll . . . try . . . I'll see what happens."

On the couch, the frozen girl had no appearance of reality. Her position was still the same, one foot was in the air,

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her hand was outstretched. Lying down in that awkward position made her look like a corpse in rigor mortis, except her small breasts rose and fell slowly and evenly as she breathed.

Harry clenched his hands till his nails cut little crescents in his palms. Ilse was suffering, and he was the one who was forcing her to suffer. Had he the right?

What could be accomplished by this? Why did Nils have them steal this poor sick child from the asylum? What was going on?

His mind raced on tiredly as he watched Ilse's soft, gentle hands press down on Leila's forehead . . . they went down, along the girl's face, down to the one rigid arm which stuck up in the air. Ilse massaged it gently.

"All right so far?" He asked.

"So far." Ilse said through tight lips. "Get me a drink, please, Harry. I'll need it when I get done."

He turned and busied himself at the twenty foot long bar that faced the couch. He mixed her a strong drink and himself a weaker one.

He finished mixing the drink and turned so that he could see the two girls.

Ilse's face completely drained of blood was to him. Her palms were touching the waist of the frozen girl. Ilse had moved away from the couch.

Leila was floating in the air, as though glued to Ilse's hands.

Ilse and he were as statue-still as any catatonic. He felt one of the glasses slip through his suddenly moist fingers. It landed on the floor with a muted crash.

Then suddenly and horribly the floating girl began to swear. Leila cursed and raved as though she were ninety years old and had spent every waking moment increasing her foul vocabulary.

She damned Ilse's soul into and out of the bottommost layer of hell. It went on and on till he wanted to vomit.

And all the time Ilse stood there, frozen, with the raving girl levitated at her finger tips.

"Watch out" Nils had said, "for anything . . . anything, supernormal."

VII

THE obscenities finally died away. The girl was quiet. Harry pressed his knuckles into the sides of his forehead. He was close to the breaking point he thought, for, an idiotic picture had arisen in his mind. With Ilse standing as she was, Leila floating at her finger tips in defiance of gravity, all he had been able to think was that next Ilse would pass a hoop over the girl's body like a magician to prove the absence of any gadgets.

"Ilse Lattimore!" He started. Who had spoken? Then he pressed sweat wet palms against his trouser legs. It had been Leila. But a different Leila. She was speaking now, quietly, rapidly, and in contrast to the stream of filth which had just poured from her, now her voice was sweet, low, and almost emotionless.

"You must stop this, Ilse Lattimore. Right now. Or you will pay, and pay and go on paying for your temerity!"

Ilse's face was washed clean of any reaction. She stood, hands in front of her, palms touching the girl, body erect. Then slowly, she began to waver.

Leaping to her side, Harry pressed her to him. She shook her head to clear it. She said, "It's all right now, Harry. I'm not going to faint."

He stepped away and stood watching as she gestured at the couch. The girl floated away from her outstretched arms and then, slowly descended till she was level with the support of the couch. Only then did the couch springs creak as gravity again claimed its own.

Leila lay on the couch, not frozen now, but immobile, drained and slack.

Handing Ilse the drink he had not dropped, he went to the bar and poured a water glass full of liquor. He drained it in two gulps. When he felt it was safe, he turned to face the woman he loved. She was slumped in an easy chair, sipping at the drink he had prepared for her.

He went to her, sat on the arm of the chair and said, "Darling."

"I know what you're going to ask,

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Harry and I don't know the answer. I don't, I don't, I swear I don't." Ilse put her face in her hands and dry sobs racked her body.

Harry was able, because of the amount of liquor he had drunk, to look at her comparatively passionatelessly. He said slowly, "I don't think I can believe you, my dear."

He knew he should put his arms around her, draw her to him, calm her, offer his protection for what little good it was, but he felt anger surging through him. Was he alone in this game of lunatic blind man's buff? Ilse and Nils both seemed to know so much more than he did. . . .

"How did you do that, Ilse?"

"I don't know, Harry." She was biting her lips now.

HE LOOKED down at her. Love, even lust was wiped away as he considered that she must be withholding information from him. She must have tricked him. Must have. Besides, now that he was able to be this calmly objective, why had she suddenly gone to bed with him? All the times he had seen her with Nils, she had never responded in any way to his desire for her. If anything, she had twitted him, gently, but she had twitted him about his lack of spirit, about the fact that he did not know how to arouse a woman . . . why then had she suddenly changed?

He knew what he looked like, and he knew that no other woman had ever been seized with a passion for him. If what he was thinking was true, then she had allowed him to make love to her; he shook his head and changed that to, she had made love to him for a reason. For some reason that he had to know. As he had to know how she had made Leila defy the law of gravity. And above all else, what had Leila meant by that threat?

Ilse cleared her throat preparatory to speaking.

But he was too deep in thought to allow her to catch his eye. A picture arose in his mind's eye. That moment when he had thought his experiment a failure. When he had been standing looking at the twig in the bell jar. Precisely what had happened right after that? There had been a knock on his door . . . and concurrent with the knock on the wood, the twig had become alive!

And who knocked on the door? Whose presence had brought about the metamorphosis? Ilse . . . he remembered her standing in front of Nils . . . hand upraised to knock on the door again as he had opened it.

His whole experiment had been planned for one reason. To see if he could force a presence to make itself known. He had been much more successful than he had dreamed. The twig-snake had been the clue, but he had been too dull to see that Ilse had been the result of his trial. He had raised her, like a medieval alchemist; he had caused a succubus to appear . . . he grinned wryly to himself as he thought of what a succubus was rumored to do. Yes, she satisfied all the conditions. . . .

The succubus had made itself known, had seduced him, physically and mentally. What a dolt he was not to have seen it all sooner! How else could he and Ilse have stolen a patient out of a guarded insane asylum with such ridiculous ease?

Now, he thought, looking down at the exquisite face of the woman he still loved, now, he really had a tiger by the tail. If she could levitate a human, then telepathy would surely be child's play to her. He stared at her trying to see if she had read the tenor of his thoughts. He learned nothing. Her visage was mask-like.

She said, "I feel lost."

Not half as lost as I feel, baby, he thought.

"We'd better get Leila back to the hospital." Her voice was still as toneless as it had been ever since he had called her at the asylum. Was that a clue of some kind? He had thought earlier that she was upset by her experience, by the

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probing finger that she had said had investigated her mind. But that was a lie. Or was it? If it was a lie then there was some other reason for her lack of warmth. Could it be that she no longer needed to dominate him sexually? Had something been accomplished this evening? Something behind his feeble power to understand?

SINCE she wanted to return the catatonic he decided to argue against it. He said, "But Ilse, Nils said he'd get here as soon as possible. Hadn't we better keep her here till he arrives?"

"If there's a bed check this evening, then I'm lost, they'll discover her absence." Ilse was distrait, arguing as though something of value was at stake.

"But if we just take her back without waiting for Nils, what will we have accomplished?"

"Nothing . . . nothing at all. And I'm afraid that is the sum total of what we will ever accomplish."

Oh, oh, he thought, so that was the way the wind blew. They were to give up the battle, forget all about the puzzles that were slowly, surely driving him mad.

He wanted desperately to be alone, to be able to try and think it out without distraction. There must be something that had happened, something in what Leila had said that would tell him what he wanted to know. Obviously it had meant a great deal to Ilse.

"Let's wait," he said, "at least another hour. Let's give Nils at least that long."

"Harry," her tone was impatient now, "what could keep Nils away from here if he really wanted to come? He had no responsibilities. You know that. If he hasn't come it's because he didn't want to."

That was true. Except for sex he could think of no possible pressure that could keep Nils away, if Nils wanted to

[*Turn page*]

Round-Up Pete Sez:
"The man who did more to arouse us workingmen was the inventor of the alarm clock."

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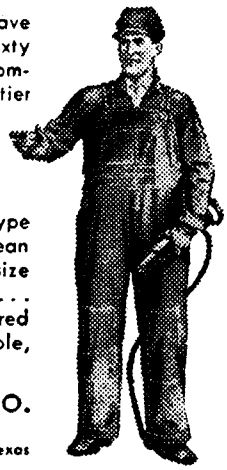

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come. But that raised a whole new series of questions, which at the moment he did not feel like trying to answer.

Ilse sat next to her patient. He wandered around the huge room, which Nils had dubbed the "loving room" on one occasion when he had offered the use of his place to Harry for a week end. Harry Boyce, he thought to himself, boy wonder worker. The man who can work miracles. A man who could, for the sake of an idea, hurt himself desperately. Was that the strength that Nils had referred to? Was that one of the things that was fading out of this pale grey colorless world into which he had been born? Or was it a masochistic aberration neatly disguised by surface rationalizations? He shook his head irritably as he continued to stride back and forth through the uncluttered room.

If he denied the validity of what had happened under the bell jar, then he must consider himself no longer sane. This he was unwilling to do until there was more evidence. Of course, he thought wryly, a psychiatrist would not hesitate in a diagnosis if told about a girl floating in mid-air, a twig metamorphosed into a snake, and a woman who claimed the ability to cure insanity by the laying on of hands. Thinking of Ilse forced him to turn and face her.

She still sat next to Leila. There was no emotion visible on her face. Her eyes unwaveringly clung to the hands of a clock. Each passing moment, her pose made clear, would make it that much more difficult to return the catatonic girl to the asylum.

Harry cleared his throat and said roughly, "All right, Ilse, put on your hat and let's go. I give up. Nils isn't coming."

ILSE got to her feet and prepared for the journey. He scooped Leila up in his arms. He looked around the room. Suddenly making up his mind, he dropped the limp body of the girl into an arm chair and rushed across the room. Taking the big couch in both hands he lifted. It was heavy. It made him grunt to swing it to one side. He finally succeeded in throwing it over on its side. Ilse looked at him wonderingly for a moment, then gasped and joined him.

He ripped the springs out of the base of the couch. Above them the plastic bubbles of the mattress were revealed. He was conscious of Ilse breathing on the back of his neck. He stuck one arm deep into the bowels of the couch and moved his hand around.

Nothing.

He stood up. There was one more chance. He ran from the room. At the far end, to the right, was the door that lead to the cellar. He pulled it open and slammed down the stairs. Light flooded the basement automatically at the approach of his feet. There, about ten feet in from the side wall on the ceiling! The couch would rest just above that point.

But there was nothing in the cellar that would indicate his feeble hunch was correct. Much more slowly he retraced his path. Upstairs in the living room, Ilse, face drawn and anxious, "Was there. . . ."

"Nothing, it was just a stupid idea anyhow." Sure it was stupid, but it would have restored his faith in Ilse . . . and that would have been heavenly. He had thought, just as he was ready to leave, that perhaps Leila had been levitated by some kind of apparatus. Perhaps, he had hoped, someone had discovered a means of overcoming gravity. If that were so, if there had been a gadget concealed, then it would have meant that some outside person was involved in a vast hoax aimed at destroying his relationship with Ilse.

But . . . no gadgets.

Outside, once he had placed the comatose girl in a comfortable position, he sat behind the controls of the heli-car. He heard Ilse settle down at his side. Above, a moon that could have been painted by any untalented Sunday painter, beamed as though love must automatically come alive under its pale light.

Sneering at the moon, he drove on

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through the night. Neither he nor Ilse said a word while he drove up into the air, slanted off at an angle and set the robot pilot for the hospital. Only then did he slump back in his seat and light a cigaret. He offered Ilse one by gesturing with the pack. She refused it by shaking her head.

VIII

NOTHING was said while the car settled down on the lawn that surrounded the mental hospital. Only when he had followed Ilse's stiff back in through a side door, carrying the unconscious girl cradled in his arms, and had held his breath till he dropped the girl in her bed, did he speak.

"Good night, Ilse."

"Whatever you've been thinking, Harry, it's not true." Ilse made no attempt to plead, to use her sex to convince him. She stated it flatly. Then she waited.

Two of them, standing inches apart, a fatuous moon peering in through a grilled window, and all he could bring himself to say was, "I see, Ilse. G'night."

Then he ran away from her, and from the hospital. He was getting into Nils' car when, off to the right, behind a bush he saw a stir of movement. Had he been spotted at the last moment? He froze. It *was* an attendant for he could see the man's white uniform. But the man was not in pursuit. Instead, he got up from all fours, onto his feet, and then stood stock still for a second shaking his head, the way a man does when coming out of a shower, or the way a man does when he is returning to consciousness.

Harry waited to see no more. Leaping into the car, he gave it the gun and shot off into the air as though galvanized. This then, was the reason they had been able to kidnap Leila. The guards were hors de combat . . . but who or what had knocked them out? And why?

Back in his own room, Nils' car safely ensconced in an overnight hangar, he lay in bed and considered his big toe. He had done everything in his power. He had left a steady automatic call for Nils on the phone. If Nils didn't answer it could only mean that he had not returned home, or that he did not intend to answer.

Wiggling his big toe he wondered whether man had lost much when big toes ceased to be prehensile. He did not have the slightest intention of wondering about any of his larger problems. They were too much for him. He was a small man, with small ambitions. He had tried to get into the big league, had tried to find answers to things that had puzzled him. Well, he was beat. He knew when he had had enough. No more for him.

Of course, once having made a good resolution it was impossible to keep it. The moment he decided to put the whole thing out of his mind he remembered the first clue he had ever encountered. Lazily reaching out to a stack of magazines, he plucked one from the stack, dislodging the ones on top of it. He opened it to a dog eared page. There was the blasted article that had started it all. Too bad it was so smart alecky in tone. Too bad he had ever read it. Too bad he had ever, as a kid, begun to read science fiction. If he'd stuck to baseball stories he'd never have read magazines that raised big questions . . . and best of all he would never have read that article. The article was in a magazine more than thirty years old. The cheap paper was yellow and crisp.

But the words still burnt into his mind as they had the first time he had read them . . . his eyes wandered down the columns although he had memorized the contents long ago.

PHOOEY ON NOSTRADAMUS!
by
Martin Gardner

REF: Earth, Moon and Planets, *F. L. Whipple, 1941, page 8 f.*
Ency. Brit. Mars
Ency. Americana, Mars
Gulliver's Travels, Voyage to Laputa, Chap. 3

YOU can take the incredible prophecies of Mother Shipton, Bacon and Nostradamus and roll them all up in a small ball and forget

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them. The all time high for long distance seering must definitely go to Dean Swift.

In *Gulliver's Travels* in the section devoted to the *Voyage to Laputa*, in Chapter 3, the section where Gulliver is visiting the cloudland of the scientists, comes what the *Encyclopedia Americana* calls the most amazing prophecy of the last thousand years!

"They have likewise discovered two lesser stars, or satellites, which revolve about Mars, whereof the innermost is distant from the centre of the primary planet exactly three of his diameters, and the outermost five; the former revolves in the space of ten hours, and the latter in twenty-one and a half; so that the squares of their periodical times are very near in the same proportion with the cubes of their distance from the centre of Mars; which evidently shows them to be governed by the same law of gravitation that influences the other heavenly bodies."

What's all the shooting about? Merely this. Those two moons of Mars that Swift spoke about so surely were not discovered until 1877 by Asaph Hall. This was one hundred and fifty-six years later! The bitter Dean made his incredible prophecy a century before a telescope had even been made that was capable of seeing the moons!

Hall, in charge of what was the world's best telescope, a twenty-six incher, at the Naval Observatory in Washington, D. C., discovered the moons at this time only because Mars was then unusually close to the earth. He named them Phobus and Deimos for the two horses that drew Mars' chariot. He discovered that Phobus, the larger of the moons, was fifteen miles in diameter, and that Deimos was half this size. He found too, that Phobus would appear larger when overhead than when at the horizon. Both moons are so near Mars that it would be impossible to see them at the poles.

The topper on all this is that besides predicting the dual moons, their sizes, their probable distance from Mars and practically everything else there is to know about the satellites, Swift put his finger on a fact unique in the entire universe!

Phobus, the larger of the two moons goes around Mars in the same direction that Mars rotates, but in a third the time. This moon is the only known one in the entire solar system that revolves around another body faster than the other body rotates!

Aside from the fact that Swift was a little off in his estimate of the distance that the moons are from Mars, the rest of his prophecies are, "remarkably close to the truth" according to Whipple in *Earth, Moon and Planets*. Whipple is an astronomer not given to exaggeration.

Since Swift did predict that Phobus, because of its speed, would rise in the West and set in the East, he can be forgiven for his slight error as regards the distances of the satellites from Mars.

Speculations on how or where Dean Swift got his astounding information can lead into some amusing bypaths; as the chance that Swift, by one of those folds in time, beloved of science-fiction writers, was able to see into Asaph Hall's telescope a century and a half later; or that Swift was for a brief moment blessed, or cursed with clairvoyance or, and this sems more probable. . . . suppose an unknown and unheralded scientific genius of Swift's era had constructed a telescope far in advance of his time and by it was able to see Phobus and Deimos in his instrument. Unable to convince anyone of his era of what he had done, the unheralded genius had told Swift about it and the Dean had incorporated it in his tale as an amusing sidelight. Derision then conquered this early astronomer and he destroyed his telescope and died with the truth as his only accomplishment.

But however Dean Swift was able to tear aside the web of the future and see that which no man was to see for another one hundred and fifty years this section of *Gulliver's Travels* stands as a record that Swift the saturnine was a seer of pyschically spectacular powers!

TWO things had puzzled Harry ever since he had read about Swift's weirdly accurate prophecy. How had Swift seen something science was not to discover for a hundred years . . . and . . . this was the biggest question of all, the one that arose to tantalize him constantly . . . was it because of the seership that Swift had been punished by the harrowing madness that had destroyed one of the finest brains in centuries? Was there a connection? And if there was, who did the punishing? Why had Freud, as an example, who had pushed the boundaries of man's knowledge steps further out in the unknown than any other man had ever done, why had Sigmund Freud been punished by senile decay, a belief in spiritualism which, in his last years, destroyed his productivity. There it was again. Man's calm clear thinking years made into a mindless mush by what, or whom? Was it completely mechanistic? Was the "it" just arterio-sclerosis which wiped away the clean sanity of men's minds, or was something or someone else involved?

Swift, Freud, Crookes, an endless list of thinkers whose very thinking processes had been affected so that the end of their lives was a horror of contradiction to what had gone before, an antithetical end to what their lives had stood for. . . .

Of course, Harry thought, rolling over on his bed and shifting his regard from his big toe to that spot on the ceiling

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again, there was his other big clue. Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*. He'd read that because of his interest in primitive people's folkways. As much as he disliked most of the cultural anthropologists she was to him the big exception. It had been when he was reading about her theory that certain tribes could be divided into various pyschotic patterns, that tribe X for instance lived and died in what was in essence a paranoid culture that he had felt the first gentle hint of something so big that his mind had almost stopped working for a while. He had to rest for a couple of weeks after his first reading of Dr. Benedict's thesis. Not for what she said, but for what he had extrapolated from it. . . .

Then he was on the rat race again. Seemingly he had proved that certain elements in witchcraft had some basic rational element. Lifting the cover of the bed he reached under the cloth and pulled the bell jar out into view. The green and brown twig lay, bereft of magic or movement. He looked at it unseeingly while he tried to push his brain to some kind of synthesis of what he had discovered. There was the twig, and there was the fact that someone or something which he called Ilse could repeal the law of gravity. Levitation was possible, if he was to believe the evidence of his senses. But Ghovind Dhas had said that he might doubt even those senses. For the sake of argument he would assume that he was sane. Then it followed that if he was sane he had seen Ilse levitate Leila.

There was one final factor. If Ilse was telling the truth, then certain kinds of insanity could be cured by the laying on of hands. This, he thought, would seem to indicate that perhaps the ancients had had a clue when they thought of insanity as possession.

But, and this was the poser that made him gulp, possesion by whom?

Possession made him think by an automatic mnemonic of Charles Fort and his followers, those people who had believed that man is owned. Owned by someone else. Possessed in short.

Who were the possessors?

IF THERE were possessors, then the horrible state the world was in and had been in back to the dawn of recorded time, was because there were outside powers who made a practice of interfering in human life.

Still staring at the twig, he shook his head like a dog ridding itself of water. These were dangerous paths his mental feet were taking. This was the blueprint for paranoia. As little as he knew about pyschiatry he knew that a belief like this one could cause him to end up in a tasty little cell with neatly padded walls and a jacket to match.

But of the two alternatives, he decided he would prefer to believe himself insane rather than think that the whole world with its brawling millions was in the grip of masters so cynical as to have been guilty of the way the world had been guided for ten thousand years.

He had his hand on the bell jar preparatory to pushing it back under his bed when he heard feet tap-tapping on the stairs outside his room.

There was no rap on his door, it just opened and Nils rushed into the room. Harry gasped, for as the door opened, the twig under the glass changed back. Back into a snake. Then . . . he wasn't insane.

That meant that the other, worse hypothesis was the correct one!

But before he could consider this, Nils said, "Throw your clothes on. The cops are after you!"

"Cops?" It was too ridiculous a change of pace for him to be able to grapple with it. He pulled his clothes on helter-skelter, and worried at Nils with his eyes. Snake-twig, twig-snake. Ilse-Nils, Nils-Ilse. Was there some meaning in this continuing gestalt?

"Hurry, you fool!" Nils was at the window, waiting impatiently. "There they come."

Harry got obstinate. He felt he had been stampeded too often. Instead of putting on his jacket, he paused and

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walked to the window. Was Nils lying for some obscure reason? No, down on the street he could see the little two man heli-car parked. Two burly uniformed men were walking across the sidewalk.

Of course there was no guarantee that they were indeed coming after him, but at least there were real police entering the house. Then the idea hit him, froze him, so that Nils had to push him out of the window angrily. What reason did he have to believe in the reality of the police? If some kind of super-hypnosis were at work it would certainly be as easy to convince him of an illusion like this as. . . .

But his feet were out the window. He looked down and saw his landlady waiting on the steps. She was greeting the police, inviting them into the house. Then, if the police were real they had come at her behest. That was still another puzzle which he had to solve.

Nils body bulked large behind him. Harry turned and said over his shoulder, "What am I supposed to do, Nils? Just drop off into space?"

"Don't be more of a damned fool than you have to be! To your left. There's a rope. I knew this was coming. I dropped it from the roof earlier."

Even as Harry began a painful hand over hand climb up the rope which he found where Nils had said it would be, he wondered how Nils could have known that the police were coming. And if Nils had known, why hadn't he been warned earlier?

He was gasping, for office work does not fit one for rope climbing, and in addition to his physical softness, the strain felt as if it had ripped his chest wide open again.

If it had not been for the consummate ease with which Nils followed after him, he doubted if he would have been able to make the rooftop. He paused with one hand reaching, strained in a deathlike grip, marshalling his forces for the last surge of energy he needed to make the difficult muscle up to the roof proper.

Below, Nils whispered harshly, "Put your feet on my shoulders, I'll push you up high enough so you can get—"

That did it. Calling on a last surge of adrenalin, he managed to climb unaided to the roof. But it had taken a great deal out of him. He stood stupidly, hands shaking with the cessation of the strain as Nils bounded after him.

IN THE center of the roof like a magic carpet, sat Nils' heli-car. Certainly then, this emergency had been known long in advance. He turned to face his friend.

Nils voice barked at him, "What are you standing there for? Get in the car, quick! Those cops may think of the roof at any second."

He took a deep breath and hoped that his voice wouldn't quaver as he said, "No, Nils. I haven't done anything. Why should I run? The only reason I've come this far is that you've completely stampeded me."

THE MOON which had failed in its romantic attempt earlier in the evening now chose to absent itself. But just before its light was hidden by a scudding cloud, he saw Nils' face begin to work. It was frightening. The man looked so much like a Viking anyhow, that this anger which was letting itself come into view was like watching an ancient berserker rage in the making.

"The blood, Harry . . . the blood from your chest! The landlady found traces of it. She thinks you murdered someone!"

So *she* had gone into his room. And after he had warned her not to! The fear of danger was washed away by irritation at the woman's nosiness.

"Besides," Nils voice was low now, "Ilse has spilled the beans. She's told the authorities that you helped her kidnap the girl!"

This was too much!

Friendship be damned. If he were to believe this, then . . . then he could really no longer love her. Forgetting everything in a surge of unreason, he lashed

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out in a sudden frenzy at his friend.

Despite the disparity in their sizes, despite the wrath which Nils was manufacturing, the blow should have pulped his unprotected chin.

But nothing happened. Harry stood and stared at his fist. It had not bounced off flesh and blood. It had not bounced. He felt no jar, no wrench of torn muscles the way you do when you swing at and miss a target. He felt nothing at all. His blow had not landed. Its force had been dissipated.

Nils looked at the shaken man. He said softly, "I'm sorry, Harry. Truly I am. *Now* will you get into my car?"

Head whirling, Harry Boyce stepped into the vehicle. Some last remnant of sanity kept trying to say, now you have another clue . . . another fact.

But the fact was too incredible.

He did not choose to believe that his friend was invulnerable.

The state of shock was kind in a way, for it saved him from worry when the rooftop door opened and the two policemen charged out into full view, guns drawn.

For the first time in his life he lived through a barrage of bullets, and the fact did not even concern him. The helicar drew away from the rooftop rapidly.

He looked down incuriously at the shrinking men who waved angry fists at him as the car drew out of their range. At the controls Nils said, "We'll pick up Ilse."

The words conveyed nothing to him at all. . . .

"During . . ."

NOTHING had changed as nothing could change in that area that was of no time and no place. Throbbingly a mind asked, "Is She there?" Silence expanded till it seemed to enfold the universe.

The thoughts pounded harshly. "We are alone. Just we four. We must move even more rapidly."

Another brain asked for, "Has She suspected?"

The answer came hesitantly, "As far as I can tell, no."

The one female and the three males communed for what might have been no time, or all time. Then the most dominant male thought, "We will continue."

The female thought, "Hurry . . . hurry . . . please hurry!"

Then all was quiet as it had been in the beginning and would be at the very end. They were gone. . . .

IX

FAR above the city Nils turned to Harry and said, "Here, you forgot this." And handed over the twig. The last time Harry had seen it was as it turned into a snake. Nils was admitting that he had something to do with the transformation!

Nils had turned it back into a twig!

Sitting in the car, flying through the endless night, Harry fought to get his brain under his control. This was no time to lose out, not now, right this minute when evidently Nils was ready to admit something.

He took the twig from the man who sat at the controls, face frozen into immobility. Placing the twig in his pocket, Harry Boyce struggled for self-control.

Nils said, "No point in leaving a snake for the cops to brood about. No telling what they might figure from it."

"Are you," Harry Boyce was regaining a degree of sanity, "are you going to give me any inkling as to what this is all about, Nils?"

"Do you think I'm a sadist? Harry, have you forgotten whatever liking you ever had for me? Do you really think I'd be torturing you this way if I could help it? Trust me just a little bit. Please, Harry."

That was just peachy-dandy, Harry Boyce thought ruefully. This was the classical moment in the "had-I-but-known" type of story where everything

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could be cleared up in two minutes but there is a "reason" which prevents the clearing up.

But Nils was speaking again, "Harry, look at me. Can you blank out your mind, prevent a telepath from ripping aside your defenses and peering into your cortex? Can you?"

"Of course not."

"That's the only reason I cannot explain . . . and believe me in my way, I'm working just as much in the dark as you are."

"It's hard to believe it."

"I know, I know." Nils was getting irritable. "Don't think I don't know. But . . . hold on, just a little while longer . . . I promise you it *can't* go on much longer."

"Then," Harry thought he might as well probe around the edges a bit, "there are telepaths?"

Nils nodded.

"And . . ." this was getting close to the thinnest part of the ice, "gravitation can be controlled?"

Another nod.

"Nils," this was the long shot, "are these powers human?"

No nod. Just silence. Then, "Not at the moment. But they can be and will be . . . if. . . ."

The heli-car was descending, Harry's stomach told him with a sick lurch. Peering unbelievingly out into the night, he said, "Nils, this isn't the asylum! I thought you said you were taking me to Ilse."

"There was no time for discussion," Nils said.

They got out onto the esplanade that led to the museum in which Ghovind Dhas worked. Harry looked ahead. One lighted window indicated that Dhas, as usual, was working instead of sleeping.

"Why are we here?"

"I can't tell you. Go in, see Dhas, speak to him. I'll be back with Ilse, shortly."

Nils patted him on the back in comradely fashion and re-entered the heli-car. It soared away and was gone. Boyce walked towards the lighted window.

HE PEERED inside. Dhas was up all right, and hard at work behind his desk. The hows and whys were all beyond him. Shrugging fatalistically, Harry tapped on the window. He had always known that Dhas was a febrile, nervous type, but the leap he took when he heard the sound was frightening.

Gulping, fighting to conquer his nerves, the man came to the window. "Harry! You . . . frightened me. Come in."

This was his night for windows, Harry thought as he shinnied up the sill and climbed into the room. It was as he had left it, so long ago, so short a time ago. Was it only yesterday that he and Ilse had made their visit here?

Ghovind Dhas, ducked, weaved, jerked, went through his series of patterned tics and finally managed to get out, "What brings you here at this time of night?"

"That's a good question, pal, I wish I knew the answer."

Why was he there? Because good old Nils had dumped him there. What was he to do? Talk. So, he talked. "Been a busy little bee, Ghovind. Real busy. Been learning things."

"Yes." The little man prompted when he fell into silence. "What kind of things?"

Reaching into his pocket he took out the twig and held it between his palms. "Oh, like when is a twig not a twig. Good riddle, isn't it?"

Down behind the desk, out of Boyce's sight, Dhas' finger tapped a button. A wire recorder was activated. He bent forward covering the action. "Fine riddle. What's the answer?"

"When it's a snake!" Harry began to giggle. His face crumpled, fell apart. Hysteria mounted.

"Harry!" Dr. Dhas' voice was commanding, sharp, like a slap in the face, "Harry, stop it!"

Somehow he managed to stifle the giggles that mounted fighting for release.

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"I've got lots of riddles." A little shard of a giggle managed to work its way out. "Like, how can a woman float in the air, and when is a man invulnerable . . . and how could Nils have known where I parked his heli-car. Sure I got lots of riddles. And how could Nils have known in advance that the police were coming for me . . . and—"

The tiny Hindu leaned forward over his cluttered desk anxiously. "The police are after you?"

"Sure! They think I killed someone. They should know I kidnapped a lunatic . . . they'd have still another reason to be hot on my trail." No use, the giggles were stronger than he. They poured out of him.

Dr. Dhas handed him a cigar. Said anxiously, "Here, light this . . . perhaps if you keep your hands busy you can regain your self-control."

THE anxiety on the Hindu's face was somehow even more ludicrous than anything else. Dhas seemed overly anxious for the cigar to light. But it was hard to do because the laughter was making him shake. Holding his stomach with one hand he managed to light the cigar with the other. Clouds of smoke emanated from his mouth. They became little round mushrooms as the cachinations that possessed him forced his breath out in bursts.

"And Ilse, my lovely wonderful Ilse—she's not human. She's one of the enemy—did you know, Doctor," Harry leaned forward drunkenly anxious to convince his friend, "that we are owned? And that Ilse is one of the owners? Surest thing you know . . . she's . . . she's. . . ."

And then the room funneled up around him. His last conscious thought before the blackness encompassed him was a silly one. "When you have Ghovind Dhas for a friend you don't need an enemy . . . he's doped me." The last thing his eyes saw was the statue of Kali. It seemed to glare at him.

Then that was all. It was as though he had never been born.

When he came to, it was sudden. There was no long drawn out period of fuzziness. One moment he was unconscious, the next he was in full possession of his faculties. He felt rested, better than he had in a long time.

He sat up, and looked around him.

He regretted looking instantly.

The room he was in was pleasant except for the fact that the window was barred, and the walls were padded. He was in an asylum and in the kind of room they reserved for their most violent customers.

In a way it was a relief. So he had been mad all the time. All his wild hypotheses had been just that, wild. There were no possessors, and he was not possessed, except by his own sick mind. Wondering if his calm acceptance of this was good or bad for him, he managed to get to his feet and make his way to the window. Outside the morning sun lit up a pleasant lawn. Unless he was hallucinating, he was in the lunatic asylum where Ilse worked. That was nice, he thought ironically. At least he'd have someone to talk to, when things got dull.

Heigh ho, the merry oh. If this was the way a madman felt he was glad he was not sane. Rested, at peace with himself and the world, he stretched, filled his lungs with air, and was glad to be alive.

"Harry!" He realized that he had been hearing his name whispered for quite a while. Resolutely he had not wanted to recognize the voice that called him. But that was senseless. He turned and saw her face through the peephole in his door.

It was lovely as he remembered it. He was glad of her, if nothing else. Wondering rather idly if he had really made love to her or just imagined it, he meandered over to the door.

"Hullo, darling," he said, and smiled happily. "How're you?"

Her voice was still a tense whisper, "Harry, oh, my very dear! We've got to

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get you out of here! Fast!"

"Get me out of here?" Was *she* insane? He felt fine. Not in the mood to leave at all.

"Shh . . . don't be silly, of course you must get out of here and quickly too!" She bit her full under lip. "Darling whatever possessed you to talk that way in front of Ghovind Dhas? He made a recording of your 'insane ravings.' The head doctor is analyzing it now! They're convinced that you are completely paranoid!"

"That's nice." Too bad she wasn't sick in the head too, then they could really be happy together. It would be so nice if she could feel the way he did. But no. She was sane and worried. The way he had been last night . . . and all the other nights and days of his life. He luxuriated in the feeling of release that was his.

"Nice?" Ilse was thunderstruck. "Harry, come closer."

OBEYING her only because it was easier than arguing, he pushed his face to the peephole. Only about two thirds of her face showed through the circumscribed area. A part of her chin, her mouth, which he felt like biting, her nose and eyes. He couldn't see her high forehead or her hair. It would be nice, he thought dispassionately, to have her run her loosened hair all over his naked body.

She said, "Kiss me darling, kiss me hard, and long."

It was a little ridiculous, making love through a door, he decided. Cut off too much. Ruled out too many possibilities. Nope, he thought as his mouth worked on hers, this will never be popular. A man's got a right to press a woman against him, otherwise this kissing business is a little silly. Then suddenly it was no longer silly.

"Ilse," he said, breaking free of her lips, "What am I doing in here?" Everything was back, all the fear and doubt, and lack of knowledge. All the unanswered puzzles.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is getting you out of here."

"Umm . . . one other thing matters. Do you love me?"

"With all my heart and . . . how can you doubt I love you?"

How could he doubt it, looking at her? The hell with his problems, the hell with the unanswered questions. He could not look and continue to doubt that she was human.

"Someone's coming," she said huskily. "I'll leave now. But be ready to run. I'll get the keys, open your door somehow. But from there on you'll be on your own. Dearest darling, don't doubt my love. Not ever."

And then she was gone.

He tried to recapture some of the euphoria he had been experiencing before she brought him back to his senses. But it was gone. All of it. He was again harassed, scared—and normal, if that was normalcy.

So many new unanswered questions. Why, why, why had Dhas, his friend, doped him, sent him to the asylum? Or had Dhas never been a friend. Did he have any friends? Nils . . . the biggest question mark of all, outside of Ilse. But he had made up his mind not to doubt her. That way he had one thread to hold onto.

There was no sound of any feet, but he heard a click. He waited, giving her time to get away from the door. Then on cat-silent feet, he went to the door and tried it. It swung open. All around him there was the feeling of life, of the business of the hospital going on.

Poking his head out through the partly opened door, he looked first one way and then the other. There was a flicker of movement at the end of the long hallway on which his door opened. Someone coming? No, that must be Ilse getting out of the way.

When he went through the door he stumbled on something soft underfoot. Stopping he considered the object. Clothes! It was only then that he realized that he was in a loose, white, toga-

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like hospital garment which was not quite the thing to wear for an escape.

Seconds later, dressed properly, he again looked out the door. No one in sight. Now or never. Idly, forcing himself to go slowly as though he were just a casual sight-seer he wandered down the endless corridor. Behind a door he heard a susurration, the whisper froze him into immobility. Then he sighed with relief when it dawned on him, that behind each of the doors there was a patient.

He was enveloped in the same kind of dream-like ease that had surrounded him when he had helped Ilse kidnap Leila. Was his way prepared for him?

Even as he wondered, there was the harsh and strident clamor of an alarm bell. It racked his brain, tore through the peaceful attitude he had been preserving.

Had Ilse broadcast an alarm? No, that was too ridiculous to consider. Besides, win, lose or draw he had decided to put his trust in her. But if she had not alerted the authorities, who else *could* know he was escaping?

A door opened, and she was with him. Ilse said, "Hurry!"

"How did they find out?"

"It's not you! Some other patient is escaping. Come . . . follow me."

But this meant sacrficing her! She must not be allowed to involve herself this deeply. He drew away. "Ilse, no. Get out of here. Let me take my chances."

"Don't be absurd! You don't even know which door leads outside! Don't argue, darling."

Ilse knew where the exit was, but it availed them nothing. When they ran to it, a guard was poised, ready to stop anyone who approached. Ilse said hurriedly, "Slow down, wave to the guard and then turn and follow me."

Doing as she directed, he found himself following her to a door that might have led into a linen closet. Instead, as she opened it she whispered, "This is our only chance. Downstairs!"

The way was long. Down, down, till he reasoned that they must be two or three floors below ground level. When they had passed no one in four or five minutes he hazarded a question.

"Where are we going, Ilse?"

"Down here, somewhere, one of the levels leads into a . . ." She paused and pointed to a metal door. "I think this is it."

The doorway led into almost total darkness. As she flung it open he heard the roar of the freight conveyor belt system that honeycombed the bowels of the city.

"Is this what I think it is?" Boyce asked.

He could not see her nod, and only when she realized that it was impossible for him to have seen her gesture, did she say, "Yes. I found this by accident one day. This is an emergency exit. Some workmen used it to repair a section."

All around them was the continuous never-ending rumble of the fast moving belt. Ahead, small blue lights were beginning to radiate enough light for the fundus of his eye to pick up. But shapes were still blurred, the light was barely enough to make his way in comparative safety.

They waited, next to the fifty yard wide belt, watching it pass them by. At any moment, Harry thought, they would have to take their courage in both hands and leap onto the rapidly moving belt.

OFF in the distance he could see a cluster of lights that marked a point of juncture in the system. Once they mounted the belt and let it carry them ahead, they'd have enough light so that they'd be able to pick one of the belts that was going downtown toward the heart of the city. The sound of the machinery seemed to get louder, and louder, but, he thought, perhaps that was just imagination. He tensed and said, "Now?"

A gentle palm pressure from the girl's hand assented.

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Leaping onto the belt, he was aware as he did so, that the girl had followed him. He wondered why, for with him on his way out of the asylum, it seemed to him that it would have been safer for Ilse to get back to work, to cover up for his absence as long as was possible.

Too late for such considerations now, for he felt her body crash into his as they landed awkwardly sprawling on the broad webbed belt.

There was a continuous wave-like motion in the material on which he lay. This was a far cry from the surface moving sidewalks to which he was accustomed. With nothing but dead freight being carried on the belt, he supposed there was not much reason to worry about human comfort.

Staggering to his feet, he reached down and helped the girl to get up. The belt was approaching the lights which indicated a switch off. He strained his eyes looking ahead. His sense of direction was all fouled up, and yet, when they came to the place where the belts almost coincided, he would have to make up his mind which one went to the place he wanted to go.

Hoping that the escape of the other patient was covering his own retreat, he put the whole matter out of his mind and concentrated on the choice of belts which they were approaching.

The lights were close enough now so that he could turn to his fellow passenger and try to manufacture a smile. It faded slowly. For as he turned to face her and he began to say, "I hope you know where we're going, Ilse. . . ." The words never came from his throat.

For the girl next to him, swaying on the bumping belt, smiling at him with cat-like hatred, was not Ilse.

It was Leila, the girl who had floated in the air. The "incurable" catatonic. . . .

X

AND then the rolling belt swayed and rolled and passed the one burst of light and he was in darkness again. Darkness complete, both physical, and mental. He was in a complete blackout.

The whys and wherefores no longer concerned him. He fell to his knees and then his body tilted forward and he slumped forward on his face. The movement of the belt was fluid enough to complete the illusion that he was having everyman's nightmare . . . careening through a dark and endless tunnel forever and ever . . . time without end.

The girl sat over him, body bent, head tilted. At one point she lifted his head and forced it into her lap. Smothering, face filled with cloth, he managed to rotate his head till his nostrils were free of the encumbrance. Otherwise he moved not at all. Her palm pressed onto his temple.

It was then he knew what Ilse had suffered.

Eyelids pressed tight shut, his body arched upwards in an almost tetanic convulsion as he felt his brain being violated. Probing tendrils which he tried to assure himself could not be physical ripped and tore at his cortex. In all the hypothetical instances of telepathy about which he had ever read, the process was thought of as being a gentle one. If this horror through which he was living was mind reading then no one had ever conceived of the process correctly.

Even knowing that there were no pain nerves in his brain did not help him now. It was as though a ruthless hand was pressing, squeezing his brain; he could almost feel parts of it spewing out between angry fingers.

And then it stopped.

It was unbelievable that he could have endured it and stayed alive, or sane. His head jolted on the swaying belt as the girl dropped it from her lap. She was getting to her feet. But there was no room in his mind for anger or curiosity, all he felt was a rather weak wave of thankfulness that his mind was again all his.

Lying on the belt surrounded by the

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encompassing blackness, he breathed deeply, trying to get his bodily machinery moving. It was futile. All he could do was wait for the sensation to pass. He was aware that she was walking away from him, walking along the moving belt as though she were on solid ground, as though, cat-like, she could see perfectly in the blinding darkness.

He slowly became aware that she was singing to herself; a rather tuneless little tune. "We dance and sing and prance and fling, 'tis grace that makes us glad. No greater bliss can be than his, who piously goes mad . . . goes mad . . ." Her voice rose in volume and she sang, "Then let us all go mad!"

Remembering the euphoric happiness which had been his for that little while in the insane asylum he wished that he could go mad. But the word 'mad' was enough to set up the whole gestalt towards which he had been working. If the world were to be rescued from madness, then it was his duty to be sane, come what might.

HE HAD regained his senses in the proverbial nick of time he realized as the rolling belt approached another cluster of lights. The girl was poised on the very edge of the rapidly moving conveyor. One pale white hand was outstretched, grasping for a control lever that jutted out from the wall. If it was a braking device as he surmised intuitively that it might be, then catastrophe was imminent. For if she managed to jolt the belt into quiescence suddenly, both he and she would die rather messily under the piled, heavy boxes which were fellow passengers on the belt. They loomed up all around both the man and the girl, if the inertia that was inherent in them were to catapault the boxes down. . . .

He leaped across the slimy, slick belt, his feet darting out, playing him false as he jumped. The girl's hand grasped the lever, pulled it—and what he feared came to pass.

The belt stopped.

All around them the boxes shifted, began to tip over and cascade down around his now prostrate body. The girl laughed happily and insanely as the huge weights tilted and slid like giant children's blocks. His leap had landed him sprawling next to the edge of the belt near the girl. If he rolled off, pushing her along with him, they would fall into the speeding rotors which screamed now that they were idling, with their burden no longer moving.

IT HAD taken Ilse a moment to realize that she was no longer at Harry's side in the darkness. The moment had changed to a second, the second to a minute, as she was aware by some sixth sense that the man at her side was not her beloved.

The blue lights had not been strong enough at first for her to be able to make out more than the fact that the man next to her was bigger, burlier than Harry. But then, as her eyes became more accustomed to the bad light she saw that Harry and . . . a . . . girl, had leaped onto the rolling belt.

It was only then that she turned and peered at the person next to her. By that time Harry and the girl had spun off into the distance. "Nils!" Her voice was sharp with fear.

He put his arm through hers and led her away from the roar of the conveyor. "Take it easy, honey, I know what I'm doing."

"But—"

"No time for that now. Here, this way." He led her into an aperture which her mind told her could not be there. A moment ago she had seen a blank wall at her side. Now, a door-shaped opening led off into the distance.

Walking at his side she refused to consider what power of his enabled him to make it possible for them to walk through solid stone.

Ahead of them light flickered, glowed, and became the light of day. The way leading outdoors. There was no trace of expression on Nils' face as he pointed toward the lawn that surrounded the asylum. He said, "Get in my car, fly to

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Ghovind Dhas. I will join you a[illegible]on as I can. Harry is in danger. You cannot come with me."

Then he was gone.

Not back the way they had come, not forward into the light. He was gone as though he had never had any physical presence. She stumbled across the green sward and collapsed into the car. Some unknown reservoir of strength allowed her to put the car into the air, throw it onto the automatic controls, and then she fainted for the first time in her life.

ONE of the boxes had landed across Leila's legs, smashing them so flat that there was no longer any semblance of humanity in them when Nils arrived at Harry's side. The girl let no sound escape her lips. If anything, she seemed grimly satisfied by her immolation.

Harry was never able, then, or later to figure out where Nils came from, how he could suddenly be standing on the belt, his arms spread out in a protecting gesture. All Harry ever really knew was that as the heavy containers crashed down towards his helpless body, they suddenly stopped in mid-air.

Then Nils was busy with the girl. He grunted as he looked at the damage the girl had sustained. His hand moved back and forth near Leila's trunk and the attentuated remnants of her legs were no longer fastened to her body by even the paper thin tendrils that had held them for a moment. Another curious gesture seemed to freeze the gouts of blood that were spewing from the hip sockets. Gently Nils picked up the injured girl, cradling her in his arms.

"Come on, Harry," was all he said, and he struck off with his burden. Harry followed, mind blank, no longer able to respond to the unknown with amazement.

The fact that they were walking about three feet above the ground struck him as being neither more nor less unreasonable and impossible than anything that had preceded it. He trailed after Nils, putting one foot after the other because that was the way his automatic system made him locomote. If the orders to move had had to come from his higher nervous centers he would have been unable to change position.

The way was long.

And in retrospect, when he and Nils and the hurt girl had arrived at Dhas' room, rather dull. Inter-dimensional travel would never be considered exciting, he thought rather dully, as he sat slumped across the room from his former friend, the little Hindu who had seen fit to dope him and send him to the insane asylum. Gray, wavering walled nothingness would be about the closest he could come to putting that area into words. They had walked in timeless silence through an endless space that had no verisimilitude. The end of the journey had been much like the beginning. One moment they were surrounded by three dimensional reality, the next, loose vagaries, then back into the world at large as represented by the room in the museum where Ghovind Dhas worked and lived.

Nils placed Leila's outraged body on a couch, then turned to face Dhas. "You don't seem particularly surprised at our walking through your wall, doctor."

The little brown man's rubber-mobile face contorted, constricted, then relaxed in many tics before he said, "One loses one's ability to be amazed, Mr. Engstrand."

Nils smiled and said, "Even Harry seems more stunned than surprised."

The mention of his name forced his critical powers to attempt to get back to work. He sat up a trifle, said, "I've given up, Nils."

"No," Nils' voice was full of some emotion—fear? rage?

Harry could not grapple with the problem.

"You can't give up now. We're getting close to . . . the end."

Dhas was the one who answered. He said, "Truly?"

"Truly. We're coming to some kind of ending. It may not be the one towards

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which I . . . we, have been working, but the end is in sight."

"Am I to be allowed to know anything more than what I have surmised?" The little doctor's voice was acid.

BEFORE Nils could answer, if he intended to answer, they all saw the air car settle outside the window. Then Ilse came to them. Harry sat up straighter, tried to force his apathetic mood away, tried to respond in a more normal way. He rose, went to greet her. Held his hands before him; grasped hers in his and said, "Is it you, darling? Really you, this time?"

She shook her head slowly, "I think so, really, deep down, I think so, but how can we tell?"

There was no way to tell.

Or was there?

Disregarding Dhas and Nils, paying no attention to the dismembered girl on the couch who had begun to moan, low and deep in her throat like an animal, his arms went around the woman he loved. He held her to him, trying to get from her the deep reassurance that had once been his, hoping that the slow surges of sexual desire would convince him when no other test could.

Only when the blood was pounding in his head and waves of desire had gone through him that alternately strengthened and weakend him did he release her. For all he could tell, this *was* the woman he loved. On that assumption he would proceed.

Dhas and Nils were bent over the suffering girl. Dhas asked, "Is there anything we can do for her?"

"Given enough time," Nils said, "I might be able to regenerate the lost tissues, but I don't think we'll have any time . . . the showdown is on us."

The door behind Harry opened and two men whom he had never seen before entered. Between them was one of the loveliest women whom he had ever seen. All three of them breathed that kind of inner assurance that was Nils' strength. All of them were a little larger than life, a little more imbued with élan vital than was normal. Nils, whose back was to the door, and to the strangers, said, "Come on in. This is it."

The man to the right of the exquisite woman said, "Is She here? I don't feel Her presence."

Dhas had left the couch and was now re-seated at his desk. His tics were getting almost paroxysmal. Rubbing his hands together in a kind of delirious glee, he chortled to himself. "So I was right. From the slightest, most guarded indications, I have built up an hypothesis . . . and it is a correct one." Making fun of himself, he said, "Death where is thy sting?"

A silence unbroken but for the *obligato* of pain which rose from the injured girl descended on the occupants of the room. Harry stepped away from Ilse and turned his eyes to the three strangers. Their attention as well as Nils' was focussed on the little statue of three eyed, blue-black Kali which Dhas had in his room. They stared at the representation of female malignity as though fearful of it. Harry looked at Kali's four contorted arms, her blood reddened feet and wondered. . . .

Dhas broke the silence. He whispered, "Her feet are red with the blood of the giants . . . the giants whom she destroyed that man might live on earth . . ."

Knowing that this was part of the Kali mythology, Harry still wondered why Ghovind Dhas had chosen this inapposite moment in which to mention it.

"You know who the giants were?" Nils asked wonderingly.

"I think so," Dhas said humbly, "I think so."

The little man again rubbed his hands in silent glee. He said, "And I think that even . . . demons . . . have to have a Mother."

The strangers looked at Nils. He said angrily, "No, I haven't told him. He's smart, like so many of these . . . earthmen. Much smarter than She thinks.

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He's figured it out for himself."

"And am I right," Dhas asked, "in thinking that this interstellar silver cord has ended up in a mother who wants to eat her children and have them too?" He giggled mirthlessly, "Or to put it another way, she wants her children to live but in subjugation to her terms?"

"Of course you're right, blast you!" Nils shook his head angrily, wrathfully, "but you don't have to rub our noses in it."

THE grouping was odd, static, as though set by a bad stage director. Nils was to one side of the room slightly in front of those other three who oddly resembled him; Dhas, behind his desk, seemingly in control of the situation; Harry, his arm around Ilse, was near the foot of the couch where Leila, disregarded, tossed and turned her head and mumbled wordlessly.

They were waiting. All of them. Harry sensed it, could see that Ilse was aware of it, knew in some odd way that these others, Nils and the ones like him, were all, waiting in fear. Only Dhas, a strange devil-may-care kind of attitude riding him, seemed not to care.

Then they came. The waiting period was at an end. And the only way they all knew it, was because Leila was suddenly quiet. Their heads, turned as though by a force which was not theirs, slowly, slowly, craned around till Leila was the focus of all their attention.

Harry had a sudden thought, he had never realized, never considered before, how small a human was, minus legs. Leila was pushing herself erect on the couch. Her arms seemed preter-naturally long, descending as they did far below the bottom of her trunk. Her face was no longer vacant. Instead it was contorted by such hate, and rage, that Harry averted his eyes quickly as though afraid he would be burnt. But unwillingly he had to look back. Because she was rising from the place where she had rested.

Legless she stood before them.

Her body was supported above the floor at just about the height she would have stood had she the limbs to hold her there.

Nils said, "This is it."

But before the squared angry mouth did more than move, Dhas spoke up. And his voice, in the face of unreason made manifest, was jesting, nasty, needling.

He said, and for the first time in all the while that Harry had known him, the little man spoke without moving, minus the tics, his voice arrogant and sure.

He said and the words were like a whiplash, "Well, old woman? What deviltry are you up to now?"

Nils and those others, gasped in unison.

Dhas spoke again and it was another attack. "Sick, sick, rageful with age, what are you going to do now? Destroy us? That's always been your solution for everything hasn't it?"

This time Harry had to avert his eyes from Leila's face. The emotions that traversed it, second-hand though they might be, were painful to see.

"Aren't you tired of hurting us? Haven't you done everything in your power to hold us back, to thwart us? Isn't it enough that you've kept man in a madhouse not of his own making for all these horrible years?"

Never pausing, Dhas went on, spokesman for a cause that had never had one before. "It's so clear, even to my little brain what's wrong with you! Why can't you, with all your benefits, all your knowledge, see what it is? You're a commonplace here on earth, so ordinary that most people don't even discuss it!

"You're old . . . and ugly . . . and no one of your world finds you desirable any longer. For that you have made us pay and pay and keep on paying! For that you have punished your children, sickened them with malice till they hate you with a deep and angry emotion that should make even your blind eyes see it!

"Old . . . old and ugly . . . that's when

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they hold onto their children. All of them, all the sick females! I should think you'd be ashamed! Don't you loathe yourself? Look at your children, peer into their minds, blast down the guards they've so carefully erected!

"What do you see? What can there be except sick disgust with you! Disgust for the foul sewer of Oepidal backwash which has ruined you and them. . . ."

The moan of fear that came from Nils made Harry blanch. What powers was Dhas daring? How could the doctor, a little man, a weak and feeble human, dare something which made Nils with his superhuman powers blanch, and turn sick with fear?

"Old woman," Dhas said, "why don't you kill yourself! You're no good to yourself, your children, or your world! You're a stench in the nostrils of the universe! Phaugh!" The little man's disgust was so real that it made Harry's stomach lurch.

To make his disgust more real, Dhas turned his back on the girl who stood there on nothingness.

Whatever happened, Harry felt glad that he was human. Glad in a way that he had never been able to feel before. Because when Dhas voice stopped, Nils throw himself on the floor in front of the legless girl, and groveled.

"Mother, "his voice was weak, castrated by fear. "Mother, I'm sorry. Don't. . . ."

Whatever it was that possessed Leila spoke.

XI

WHEN she spoke she disregarded the mewling thing that banged its forehead on the floor in abject fear and abnegation. Her hand pointed at Dhas and she said, "You have called me old."

Rotating in his chair, Dhas turned to face her. A sneer twitched at the corner of his mouth. The expression became more marked when he saw Nils' fear. It became a caricature when the little man saw that the three who were so like Nils, shared that horrid emotion.

"You are," he said, "old and sick."

The pointing hand stayed on him. The girl's rather thin, almost cold voice said, "Grow old."

You can say most things in a variety of ways. One way to describe what happened is to say that Ghovind Dhas became senile and died inside of three minutes.

Or you can say that as Harry and Ilse watched, deep lines etched into Dhas' brown leathery face, arteriosclerosis set off a miniature time bomb inside his brain, and the concommitants were awful to see. The stroke twisted the sneer even higher on his face. Hemiplegia tore his body into a still active halt, and weighted it down with a paralytic twin. Spittle gathered at the corners of his sneering mouth, and his hands, suddenly become twisted twigs, began a febrile little pill rolling dance that was disassociated from the rest of him.

His neck got thinner, cords sprang into prominence as the flesh fell away from the now too small support. As a result his head became too heavy and fell forward. The brightness vanished from his eyes, to be replaced by dull apathy. His hair fell from his head leaving it nude, desecrated.

Just before the very end, when his head was bent so far forward that his now sharp chin was digging into his chicken breasted chest, he managed to get out between his slack lips the words, "I've done what I could, Harry . . . Ilse . . . She's very close to the edge now. Mad she's been for no one knows how long. But she's been able to hide it. Drive her all the way! Break her!"

He teetered forward.

He was dead. An old, old man, head bald, face furrowed with the haggard feet of years, skull brittle and thin, claw like hands now stopped from their little dance, he lay dead, sprawled out on his desk.

He had paid for his temerity.

Harry took heart when he saw, grav-

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en on the dead face, that sneer of rejection which had accompanied the little man's daring speech. Strength, Nils had said. "You have a strength which I need." What was the strength, wherein did it lie? It certainly was not the strength of raw courage that Ghovind Dhas had owned, for certainly he felt none of that emotion. Instead, fear ran its ugly way down his spine. If She who possessed Leila could do this thing to Dhas, what could She not do? How had the little man dared to taunt her? What wellspring did man own on which he could draw at times like these?

It was no use, Harry thought angrily, he was still afraid. In the face of Dhas' magnificent exhibition, he was still weak, and cowardly. Since that was so, wherein was this strength of his Nils had said was needed?

The legless woman swayed in the air now. Her eyes were on Nils' back. One of the "others" spoke. "Nils. Don't give up now, or we're all finished! You're the leader, lead us!"

It was not enough to bring Nils to his feet, but it did make him turn his haggard face to Harry. "You're our last chance . . . you and Ilse. If we were wrong, if you are not strong enough to withstand her, then we are doomed in very truth."

"Nils!" Harry's voice boomed out, which surprised him, for he had feared it might squeak, "how can I help, if I don't know how? What's my strength? And does Ilse share it?"

The heavy leonine head nodded. "You have it equally."

THEIR conversation had diverted the thing that was in Leila. A sneer rather like the one that had decorated Dhas' face, but ugly in its implications, twitched at the small mouth of the girl.

"So my loving children have still another set of guardians whom they have put before me. Very well."

Courage had not stood before the blast of fury that came from that small, rather pretty face. What then could withstand it? Unconsciously Harry's hand went out, grasped Ilse's, and like two infants they stood side by side, daring they knew not what.

But they were to have a respite. For that which was in Leila turned its awful gaze, swung those frightening eyes from where Nils slumped in terror on the floor, up to regard the other three who stood, fear pockmarking their faces.

" 'Look at your children,' " the voice repeated Ghovind Dhas' words and the sound was like a whiplash on the four who were afraid to look her straight in the face, " 'peer into their minds, blast down the guards they've so carefully erected.' " There was a pause, then, "A good idea. Let me see what you dear, dear children have been up to."

Harry and Ilse were looking down at Nils when the process started. But it happened to all four of the "children" at the same time. Humanity drained away from Nils. His shape was changing before their eyes.

In sheer disbelief, both Harry and Ilse swung their eyes up from the perversity that Nils' body was becoming and regarded the statue, that malevolent statue of Kali which Dr. Ghovind Dhas had always kept near him. As a reminder? For the change, when it came, was from the more than human aspect which Nils had always presented, into that four armed, blue-black body with the three-eyed head, which the statue displayed.

And Ilse and Harry knew that they were seeing the "children" through their mother's eyes. And they knew too, that the mother was on an Andromeda solar system from which the children had been sent so many thousand years ago. Nine? Ten? Eleven thousand years ago? It was hard to tell, for the knowledge which was pouring out into the room was shared by the mother and her children and they needed no explanation.

The only living humans in the room knew, from the waves of mind-searing intensity that were being pounded at

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the four Andromedans, that in the long, long ago, an expedition, sent out from Andromeda had discovered a high-level planetary culture near Alpha Centauri, and that this culture had been riddled by insanity. The Andromedans, knowing almost nothing of the subject, had set up Earth, a primitive low-level culture as a psychological laboratory, a device by which they could study, and help to cure, the sickness that was tearing the Alpha Centaurians to pieces.

The giants whom Kali had destroyed! Harry gasped when he saw in his mind's eye, the mother, getting out of a space ship, and deciding between the two races which covered Earth.

One race, the Cro-Magnon, she had decided to use in the experiment, the other, the Neanderthal giants she extirpated mercilessly. This first genocide had given the world Cro-Magnon man and his descendants. With but one race of man left, the mother had first destroyed the mental equilibrium which these primitive men enjoyed, destroyed it in all but a quarter of the world's population; Harry realized parenthetically that any experiment needed a set of controls. These controls were primitive man, tribal man, the Polynesians, the Igarottes, the Esquimaux, the people who had no mental disease. The rest of the world was cut into thirds.

THREE machines were buried in the earth. In the East, one of the devices was set deep in the Himalayas. Its function was to affect the genes and chromosomes of every human within its tremendous radius, and to bring into being schizophrenia. In Europe, or what had become Europe, deep under the Urals the machine spread paranoia. In what thousands of years later was to become America, under the Rockies, the third machine disseminated mania, maniac depression . . . alternate waves of euphoric happiness alternated by attacks of almost suicidal gloom.

Four monitors were left to watch, and report on the progress of the experiment. These were the children, Nils and the three others. When they left the space ship, which was cradled in the Atlantic, and went out disguised behind force fields as human beings, the ship left the earth, huge waves spewing out in its path, leaving behind terror, mental disease, and a distorted racial memory of a thing, a place, which had in time come to be remembered as Atlantis. . . .

One of the monitors, the female, was in charge of the control group, the primitives, the others watched oveh their individual areas. Nils' function had been to monitor America.

The mother's superiors had envisaged the experiment as of short duration, a thousand years at most, which was the reason that the children had been left in charge. It had been felt that a simple task of this kind would serve as a kindergarten exercise for the youngsters, that when they reported its successful culmination, two things would happen. The insight into the ramifications of insanity gained by the experiment would cure the Alpha Centaurian culture, and the children could graduate to more mature tasks.

Instead, Harry thought, of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, there were *Patterns of Insanity*. He had been warm, Benedict had been close on the trail.

But there was no time for introspection. The insight, accidental as it was, which they were getting because the mother was mentally using every means in her power to batter down her children's guard, might cease at any moment.

They, Ilse and Harry, were in a sense eavesdropping on a family quarrel. A quarrel in which much was mutually understood, needing no explanation.

The reason for setting up insanity in its pure forms had been because in the Centaurian culture the different kinds and degrees of insanity became so intermingled as to make it almost impossible to trace a path between them. It had been felt that if the essence of paranoia, for instance, were studied, then and only

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then, could a tangled case of a paranoid-schizophrene with maniac overtones be properly treated.

But why had not the experiment proceeded along these lines, Harry wondered. The answer did not come from the mother.

ALL masquerade had been dropped. Nils, his brothers and sister stood before the legless girl in their own persona. Blue-black skinned, triple eyed and multiple armed, it was as though the statue of Kali had proliferated.

That which humanity had known as Nils Engstrand pulled itself to its feet and stood swaying before the girl its mother was using as an instrument. No words, no sound in all that endless scene. Burning eyes and tortured thoughts, but no vocalization. Harry thought the silence was worst of all.

"Humanity," Nils' thought, and the sense was burnt into Ilse's and Harry's brains, "makes me ashamed. These midges born but to die in the same day have something which you do not allow us, Mother. This little man whom you just killed was worth more than all of us put together. Why have you not allowed us to grow up! Why have you kept us in swaddling clothes? Grown up and still in kindergarten?"

"How dare you!" Came the eternal answer which was and is no answer. "Mother knows best!"

"The little man," Nils' thought, "was right and had the courage which we do not have. You're mad! Insane, that's why you've kept us here, ruined the experiment, destroyed humanity's best brains, just so you could keep us tied to your apron strings."

Harry realized that Nils was not using an Earth vocabulary, but the sense of what he was thinking translated into mundane idiom.

"Nine thousand years too long!" Nils was somehow trying to pump up his own courage, he was blushing for the shame of what he had done when he had grovelled earlier.

"I see now," the mother's fury was almost beyond control, "that you have lied to me, kept details from me, set up barriers beyond which I have not seen for too long. You dared to change the experiment . . . you've allowed the maniacs to interbreed with the paranoids . . . the schizophrenes with the others . . . there is no more pure insanity! The experiment is worthless!"

"Yes, yes, and yes! We have tried a hundred strategems, all worthless, each time hoping that some superior of yours would notice, and see what you have been doing and thus replace you. . . ."

"You silly little fools," the mother was jubilant, "you have been too long away from home. You have forgotten what a little unimportant, pettifogging laboratory exercise this experiment is. No one oversees my work. They trust me!"

"Then we are undone. All we have dared is valueless." Nils thought, and his thought was shared by his siblings.

There was a pause in which there was no mental communication, instead, waves of gloating sadistic—exaltation—came from the mother's mind, undimmed by the light years through which they had travelled in order to reach the room, the sickness of them made Harry reel.

Trying to push them from his mind he thought, so the results of the experiment have been that India has tried to solve all her problems schizophrenically, by retreating from reality. . . Europe has torn herself to shreds because of a shifting seesaw between megalomaniac aggression and paranoid suspicion . . . America has wearied herself, worn herself out between periods of maniac exaltation in which she trod the earth in seven league boots, and descended into depression which has racked her economy . . . and the peoples of earth have lived and died in chains of insanity that have thwarted their every step.

And the means by which the control groups, the savage, primitive cultures had been kept "pure"! Any attempt to incorporate them into insane civilization was thwarted by their being removed

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by disease, liquor, and the decadence caused by false values.

Questions jammed Harry's brain making it almost impossible for him to think coherently.

But there was no more time for anything by spectatorship. His last thought before the battle was again begun was, the world is a vast Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. . . .

"Mother," Nils thought, "try to forget how much you hate us at the moment and realize what you have done to us. Suppose **your** mother had attempted to hold you back the way you have done to us. . . ."

"First you dare to call me insane, now, worst insult of all, you are trying to reason with me!"

An experiment run by a mad woman, Harry thought tiredly. The world a rat race, a labyrinth of twisted motives, a controlled maze in which every single exit was sealed.

XII

THE insight which Ilse and Harry were receiving was such that they knew without cerebration that the Mother used extrasensory devices in order to control humans. When She took over, to all intents and purposes, the human whom She was controlling became a television set. Some instruments were weak. They died. Others, a little stronger, fought back; for this their minds were burnt out. The strongest of all became people whose mental passages were blocked. . . .

Catatonia resulted when Mother was using a person, the immobility coming from the freezing of all normal functions. Most of the incredibly complicated insane states for which human medical science had no explanation at all were the result of the "television" set becoming injured in the process. If Mother could use a person and leave them aphasic about what had happened, She did so . . . allowing them to return to some kind of sanity . . . (these were the "cured" lunatics, Harry thought).

But even this fraction of time was too short, for Nils was looking at Harry, waiting hopefully. "It's up to you now, Harry."

"What then is my strength?" Harry asked. "Why have you and your sister and your brothers used Ilse and me as weapons against your mother?"

"You two," Nils said slowly, "are the last of many attempts we have made to fight her. A couple of hundred years ago, when every attempt had failed I reasoned that sooner or later there would have to come an amalgam of lunacies, a balanced human being so completely poised between the different kinds of insanity which had been inherited that that person would be mentally indestructible. We tried at first to use natives, primitives, thinking that since they were the sane, they could be used against Her. That was valueless; She had no trouble in destroying them, just because they were sane.

"My idea was that if a person were to be born in this delicate state of equipoise it would be impossible for Mother to destroy him. It was a long, hard search and we were just about to give up when we found, in one generation, not one, but two of you. . . ."

His half-hearted smile took in Ilse and Harry. "Having found you, our task became, if anything, harder, for we had to help you to help us, but we dared not let Mother know what we were doing. Or let either of you know, for fear that She would read it in your minds."

"We made one last plea, asking that She release us, promote us out of kindergarten. She refused, so . . . we went to work on my plan. First I had to needle you into trying out your primitive magic idea . . . but I could not let you know that it was my idea. It had to seem to come from you. I gave you a little clue when I appeared at the end of the incantation, after I had made the twig change into a snake. But I had to be careful."

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"There was one big clue," Harry said, "that I stumbled on without your help . . . and that was the fact that you never had made love to Ilse."

NILS made a face. "Or any of the other women who love me! One of my brothers has become a trifle perverted and has managed to overcome a natural aversion to women with only two arms . . . but I find it a little distasteful still . . . however if I'm stuck here for another thousand years perhaps even my qualms will vanish."

"So while you were jockeying Harry into playing with magic, you forced me into a position where your Mother would attempt to use me as a seeing device!" Ilse said.

Nodding, Nils said, "And you proved yourself early in the game, for you, of all people whom Mother has ever used, remembered what had happened."

"What about Ghovind Dhas?" Harry asked.

"That was really ticklish. He was not in possession of this strength we needed to fight Mother, and yet through sheer ability, intuition, brains if you will, he had figured out too much about the whole situation. I would have saved him if I could," Nils said sadly. "He was one of your brightest men."

"He had me thrown into the asylum for what he thought was my safety, didn't he?" Harry asked, although he knew that was the answer.

"Yes, he couldn't be sure of your ability."

"Why did your mother kill the first catatonic?" Ilse asked. "Or did you do that?"

"No, She did. She smelled something in the wind. That was a rap on the knuckles to me, to keep me in line. I had you kidnap the other girl because I wanted to see if Mother would suspect you—She did! That's why She tried to frighten you both witless with Her demonstration of other-worldly powers.

"When you both retained your balance, She tried to bluff you, Ilse, by threatening you with the floating girl."

The other haphazard happenings, Harry realized, were part of the complicated series of chess moves that the children and the mother were making against each other.

"When Mother found She could not kill either of you mentally, her next step was obvious. She tried to kill you physically. That kept us on our toes!"

There was one question still nagging at Harry. "Swift, Dean Swift," he said, "why did She drive him mad after he deduced the existence of Mars' two moons? And the others who have found out things in advance of their time?"

"She had arbitrarily set up certain limits which she would allow men to function within. Any time man stepped over those limits, she withered them . . . She allowed a certain over all progress to be made, but She smothered any sudden accretions of knowledge. There was one period, starting in about 1840, when Her attention must have been on some other experiment, because there was more scientific progress made in the succeeding century than She had ever before allowed to be made. She became concerned with earth again just after the discovery of atomic power. From then on She has quashed any big advances."

Nils said, "I must bow to you earthmen. When I stop and think about the genius which has transcended the restrictions with which Mother has smothered your world, I am almost in awe of what your unrestricted abilities would be. Yesterday, when we came here, you were huddled around camp fires tearing semi-raw meat off bones. Today, despite everything, you have conquered your world and are ready for the universe . . . or will be when Mother has been defeated. . . ."

"I can forgive, because I can understand many of these things, Nils," Harry said slowly, "but one thing still sticks in my craw. Why did you lie and say that Ilse had told everything to the police?"

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"That," Nils said ruefully, "was unfortunate. Mother was in control of Ilse, and I had to try and keep you away from her till Mother had released her."

HARRY thought, "My hypothesis about the meaning behind primitive magical rites was a correct one!" Nils read his mind and communicated telepathically, "Mother set up an alarm system whereby our controls could call on us for help when it was needed. We could answer these pyschic smoke signals or not, as we saw fit. Sometimes, for fun, we have appeared in our proper persona, as you see us now. . . ."

No wonder, Harry thought, that demons were woven through all mythology, and magic. These blue-black, many-armed creatures fitted all the descriptions. . . .

"What about," Harry asked mentally, "folk heroes . . . Barbarossa, Charlemagne . . . King Arthur . . . the stories of the slumbering superman who will return if and when his people are in desperate need?"

"Very acute of you, Harry," Nils responded. "Yes, we are those heroes, my brothers and I . . . even on one occasion, my sister, fulfilled that function. . . ."

"Jeanne D'Arc?" Ilse's thought broke in.

Nils nodded. "We have been forced at certain times to step in so that the experiment would not be completely ruined. . . ."

"Your Mother," Harry thought, "is the Andromedan equivalent of an earthly experimental psychologist?"

"Just about."

The legless thing had followed the interchange with a mirthless smile. "Heroes." The thing thought. "These . . . 'Humans'," the very word was loaded with malice, "are your heroes. You have put this man and woman up before me, to guard you from me?"

Nils nodded slowly. "Yes," he thought.

With no further warning the attack was on. Ilse and Harry stiffened, then their bodies wavered as the brain destroying assault began.

What he had suffered before, Harry thought, was as nothing to this frontal battering that beat down on his brain now. This time the fingers that seemed to be crushing the very tissue of his cortex were unrelenting. At first, gloom descended so dark, so suicidal, that all meaning of life was lost; to live and to die was the worst futility. Far, far better never to be born . . . having been born, why go on living in a gray meaningless world, with no taste, no feeling, no anything to give reality a meaning?

When he had been pushed so far in a manic depressive slough that it seemed he could never rally, something inside him seemed to give—hope surged up within him. If that was the worst She could do, he could take it! What was all the fear for? He was stronger, far stronger than She! He almost grinned; he felt as if he were der ubermensch. Nothing was beyond his abilities, his capabilities. . . .

Just as suddenly his mood pendulumed away from the exalted state he was in, and prying, probing fingers of suspicion, dank fears of the world, of mankind . . . and worst of all of Ilse, came surging up through his mind. He looked at her out of the corners of his narrowed eyes. What assurance did he have that she loved him? Why *should* she love him. She hated him, was set to destroy him. She was a woman, and as a woman, probably working for the Mother. All women were united in a vast plot to overthrow masculine domination.

He never knew how long the attack went on. How long the moods lasted, for the terror of the moment made each state lifetimes long.

Hearing a moan, he looked down at Ilse; she had fallen in a crumpled heap on the floor, arms outstretched so that she seemed ready to be crucified. Something inside his head lifted, and suddenly he too fell, all control gone.

"You failed! Mother, you failed!" Nils thought exultantly. Harry could feel the exaltation come, feel it fill up the

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room. "Dhas was right! You are old and weak! You cannot even drive two weakling humans mad!"

THERE was no answer from the thing poised in mid-air on no legs. Harry rolled his head to one side so he could think better. The girl's face was devoid of emotion. Suddenly the support which had sustained her was no longer there.

The trunk fell to the floor. Reaching out feebly, Harry forced himself to touch the girl . . . he was instantly sorry. Her flesh was cold, graveyard cold, clammy and horrible. He knew then that she had been dead for a long, long time.

The pseudo-life withdrawn, her cadaver had returned to its proper state.

Nils picked up Ilse in one set of arms, Harry in the other, and placed them gently on the couch. He crouched down next to them where they lay, next to each other, warming each other by propinquity. He thought, "Harry . . . Ilse . . . I think we've won the first fight."

"First?" Harry thought weakly, having trouble even in projecting the idea mentally.

"We can't tell whether She is defeated altogether, or if She's sulking, building up Her strength for another attack. Our only hope is that the shock to Her ego has been great enough to make Her madness clear to her superiors . . . out there, at home."

"When will you know?" Ilse thought.

"Only at the next stage." This time the thought clearly came from all four of the Andromedans. The humans could feel the tensity seeping from the quartet's minds.

"And that is?" Harry asked.

"The machine—the one in the Rockies is the nearest. All three must be destroyed if mankind is to live sanely. But first, the one under the mountains here in America must be destroyed, and we cannot do it, or we would have long ago."

"Why can't you?" Ilse and Harry thought simultaneously.

"It was set up too carefully for that. Mother's superiors decided that if the time ever came when you earth people could destroy the machines yourselves, then, and only then, would the experiment be ended of itself, without waiting for Andromedan help. Therefore the machine has guards which prevent us from affecting its operation."

"You think the same strength that allowed us to weather the Mother's attack will help us withstand the machine?"

The four non-humans nodded.

"It is the only way."

"And even while we're assaulting the machine, for all we know She may recover and again attack us?" Harry questioned.

"Yes." Nils thought sadly. "You can have no guarantee. But you have seen how your see-sawing sane-insanity protected you from Her."

Somehow, Harry managed to stagger to his feet. Then dredging even deeper into his failing powers, he forced himself to help Ilse to stand. "Let's get it over with, once and for all." He spoke aloud, and the words seemed to hang in the air.

His love looked deep into his eyes. She said, "I'm ready if you are, darling."

It was curious, Harry thought, but it was only then that he realized the insane states through which he had progressed ever since he had first started his experiment. He had been paranoid when he made the witchcraft trial. Manic, exalted, euphoric, in the insane asylum, deep in schizophrenic weltschmerz at other times . . . the pendulum, the see-saw that kept him balanced had worked overtime.

"You have been pushed to the furthermost limits of your resources," Nils thought, "there is no point in delaying any longer. Teleportation will save us all time and energy."

The room, the office filled with its mementoes of the past beliefs of man, was gone. Ghovind Dhas' poor aged corpse, the legless girl's cadaver, all, all gone.

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One moment they were in the office, the next all six of them stood on a peak, not in Darien, but in the geographical center of the Rocky mountains. There had been no sensation of movement. It was as though one lowered a curtain on stage and raised it instantly, to reveal a completely new scene.

Harry and Ilse gasped when they saw, all around them, the rocks and rills, the rugged grandeur of Mount Genera. It was cool, crisp and invigorating.

Filling his lungs with the mountain air, Harry said, "What now, Nils?" It seemed most natural to address his questions to him; the others, the blue-black people, had no reality for him. It was hard enough to pretend that the four-armed man who faced him was Nils, without trying to imbue the others with a false humanity.

Nils pointed straight down, at the rock-strewn earth beneath their feet. "The machine we want you to destroy," he thought truthfully, "is directly beneath us. Five miles down."

"Five miles?"

Answering the unspoken question, Nils went on, "The machine, made on Andromeda, was teleported through solid rock. It is in a small chamber down there."

"How are we to destroy it?" Both humans wondered.

"We cannot tell you that, because we do not know."

"Must Ilse come too?" Harry thought desperately, "May I not try it alone?"

Nils and the others seemed to consider the suggestion. "No, we think not. Together you have a strength which may be needed."

Ilse's hand crept into Harry's. They stood like that, the clear light of the mountains almost making a penumbra of light around them. The dark scattered trees which struggled for a precarious living so far above the timber line, made a frame for them.

"Now?" Ilse and Harry thought together.

"Now." The four agreed.

THE humans vanished. A bird careening through the thin air screeched as it saw the four who remained. The bird was gone now and the four stood on the mountain top alone.

Twenty-five thousand feet inside the rock, Ilse and Harry, arms around each other's waists, stood in a tiny chamber, smooth walled; the igneous area seemed to have been polished like a new plastic. A warm glow of light came from a device in the center of the womb-like area.

All around the cave room, in various poses that ranged from the piteous to the heroic, were other humans of both sexes. The device itself was incomprehensible to human minds. It had no moving parts. Its design was so foreign as to have no meaning at all.

Of course, for anything to have meaning there must be a mind to appreciate the meaning. There were no minds in the space around the machine.

Ilse and Harry, frozen forever, love and strength and devotion, mirrored on their faces, were as instantly deprived of life as had been all the others who had been trapped of their own free will into daring to try to stop the machine.

For the machine had not been set up to enslave mankind, but to protect the earth from the Children and their plans. It was a good machine, one that worked. And would continue working still a while. . . .

After

WELL," said the child known as Nils, stretching and yawning like a cat. "It hasn't been a bad week-end."

"You don't think Mother will be too angry when she comes back into phase from Her vacation and finds out?"

"Angry?" Astonished, Nils said, "I can't see what She'd be angry about. We kept ourselves busy, we put on a little playlet, proving my contention that I am a great playwright, and we only killed three humans, two girls and an elderly man. I don't see why that'd upset Her."

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"Five dead." The female answered.

"You mean those two down in the mountain?" Nils thought. "We don't know for sure that they are dead. None of them have ever come back. After all, it's worth a little risk. Only one of two things can happen. Either they'll get to the machine and stop it, which will release us, and put the earth under our complete control, for a change, or they won't affect the machine, and they'll die."

"True," one of the other males agreed. "But I did feel you piled on the melodrama pretty thickly!"

Like any writer, human or not, Nils was instantly irate at this criticism. "Melodrama? Listen, did you ever really read any of Shakespeare? There's melodrama. . . Hamlet ends in a welter of corpses of which *I'd* be ashamed! No, I thought my little plot was rather restrained. . .and my acting, superb!"

"I thought I'd have hysterics," the female thought, "when you prostrated yourself before that silly dead girl, while I pretended Mother was controlling her. You were really funny, you know!"

An insult to his writing was hard to take, but to have his acting ability attacked! "At least I put myself in the role and pretended we were really fighting Mother. I didn't just stand around like a dummy, the way you three did!"

"Remember," the female thought, "I was busy! It was a lot of work levitating that corpse, and controlling the dead mind."

"That's true," Nils agreed, then he recovered some of his good humor and he stretched again. "It would be funny and ironical, wouldn't it, if some time one of my little plays actually worked, and we did get some humans dedicated enough, and strong enough to really destroy the machine! Wouldn't that be wonderful! Earth all ours, to do with what we willed with no restrictions from that damned machine." Dreamily he considered this future. A smile played at the corners of his mouth. "By the way," he thought, "didn't you like the way I blended truths and lies together? That's the essence of any good plot."

"Oh," the female agreed, "it's by far the best you've done so far, there's no doubt of that. And a big effect was achieved with a minimum of effort. A little hypnosis, some tele-kinesis—it was efficiently done, all right."

"A fine week-end," Nils repeated. Smothering a yawn, he thought, "no use waiting here any longer. They've failed, like all the rest. They're dead, or disconnected like the others."

"I haven't felt a quiver of thought," the female agreed, "coming from them since they entered the machine's room."

"Let's go," Nils thought.

They were gone.

The area on which they had stood was again desolate. . . .

The truth is, of course, that earth is a kindergarten. One of many such that the Andromedans have scattered on little worlds throughout the universe. It is earth's unique distinction, however, and its dire misfortune, that it, and it alone, is the Andromedan kindergarten for its mentally retarded and juvenile delinquent. A sort of reform school which has never achieved a reformation, a place for morons who tear off the legs of human flies—and sadistically torment that which they cannot understand—forever.

A Comedy of Errors and Eras

THE CROOK IN TIME

Novelet by R. J. McGREGOR

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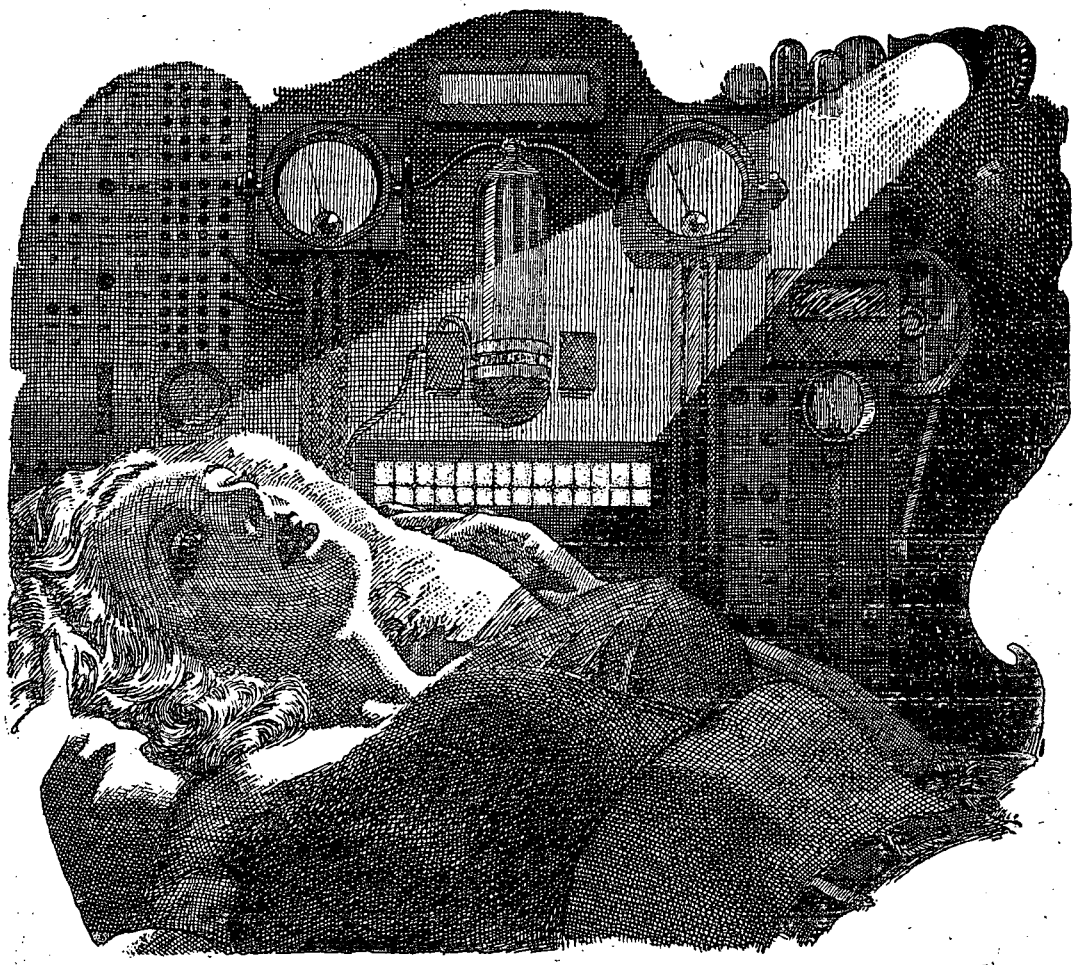
Was she an atavism, a freak, a criminal—or just a mother?



The voice had to reiterate, "What is your problem, please?"

THROWBACK

By MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

STOP being so jittery," Kathrin admonished herself sternly. "The only way you're going to see this thing through is by keeping your head."

Nevertheless, her hands shook a little as she parked by one of the rows of meters on the roof, and her knees trembled as she stepped out of the copter.

If she had only let Jon into this first it wouldn't have been so bad. Together, somehow, they might have worked it out. She hadn't been sure enough of him: that was the inescapable fact. And now she had involved and imperiled him

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as well as herself. It was up to her. It had been so overwhelming an impulse that it had swept her away. She didn't see the glimmering of a solution, but one would have to be found, and quickly; and she was the one who was going to have to find it.

As she dropped down the shaft Kathrin tried to remember if she had ever known an unregistered child. There was Bill North—people used to say he must have been unregistered; but that was probably just slander, because he was so odd. Come to think of it, his forehead was unmarked, and once she had seen him vote, so it was just libel and he must have been a full citizen. The colonies, of course had plenty of them—they didn't need an optimum population law yet, and everybody there was as good as everybody else. They said the mayor of Venusberg was an unregistered.

Kathrin shivered. She didn't want to leave the earth forever, to be a permanent exile—though she would, if she had to. All her friends, her associations, were here on earth; in all her twenty-six years she had made only two vacation tours to the Moon and one to Mars, and she hadn't the least desire to become a permanent resident of either of them. Where, in the provincial life of the colonies, would there be a market for Kathrin Clayborn's sophisticated plasto-ceramics, which were earning banked credits and a solid reputation for her here?

And Jon. The colonies wanted hydroponic farmers and sub-atomic engineers and prefabrication builders; they had no need for a specialist in fourteen-tone music. But if Jon wouldn't go, there was no reason to live at all.

The carrier stopped at the 141st floor and Kathrin opened the door to the lobby of the suite of offices. Baby-faced Lane sat facing her at the visiboard. She smiled good morning. Lane was one of the fancier touches of Amalgamated Art Enterprises; an ordinary business office would have had a robot visicom operator.

"CCD's been calling you, Clayborn," Lane said brightly.

"Put them on for me."

This was it: she would have to think fast. She entered the studio that was more like a laboratory—fitted in light blue and silver, she always noted amusedly, because Amalgamated Art Enterprises never missed a bet and Kathrin Clayborn was a silver blonde—and almost immediately the visiscreen flashed.

"This is Central Contraception Department, Clayborn," said the robot voice. "Our records show that you missed your contraceptone injection which was due on February 28th."

Good old government procrastination! It was now April 28th by the new thirteen-month-plus-Year-Day calendar. Kathrin had been banking on that.

Alternative excuses flashed through her mind with the speed of neutrons. "I should have notified you," she apologized smoothly. "I'm applying to the Selection Board."

"You are not supposed to do that without giving us six months' notice," said the robot voice severely. "The matter will be investigated and we shall report back."

Now she *really* had to work fast. "Get me the Selection Board," she told Lane.

As she asked to have the application forms sent to her, she was calculating swiftly. They would have to be returned before CCD got around to verifying. But the Board would take at least three months, she was sure, before making its examination. Then she would be in trouble for fair. But at least she would have a breathing-space in which to plan what to do next.

Kathrin started work on the day's orders, but it was hard to keep her thoughts away from her problem. It was futile now to wish that she could have been telling the truth to CCD. Never in her life had she thought of applying to the Selection Board in all sincerity. She didn't want motherhood as a career, to spend all her fertile years incubating and bearing children at ordered, stated

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intervals. And she didn't want babies by artificial insemination, either, carefully chosen in somebody's laboratory and guaranteed to be the best eugenic combination. She wanted Jon's baby.

THAT was how it had started. Like everybody else, Kathrin had had plenty of temporary affairs. But this was permanent, the real thing, what they used to call marriage, a thousand years ago; Jon and she both felt that. The yearning, the excitement, perhaps even the vast tenderness, they could get and had got, both of them, from others; but not this feeling of belonging, of being necessary to each other, of being safe together against the world.

But now they weren't safe, and it was she herself who had jeopardized their safety. Musing, as her hands deftly shaped a plastic abstract, Kathrin reflected that she must be feeling as it had been normal for a woman to feel in—oh, say, the twentieth century. She wanted the old primitive unit, man and woman and child. And not a child to be taken away as soon as the pediatricians and psychologists ruled it ready for mass rearing, but a child to be reared with its parents, knowing them, loving them and being loved by them. In other words, what they used to call a family.

Kathrin blushed as if she had said an obscene word aloud, but she might as well be honest with herself. By some quirk of heredity, she was a throwback, an atavistic reversion, a freak.

And yet, in spite of everything—in the face of loss of citizenship, imprisonment, death itself—she had obeyed that atavistic impulse. And now she faced the probability of losing the child even if she contrived to bear it. Even worse, she might lose Jon as well.

As if she had called to him, the door opened and Jon stood there.

"Jon! What in the galaxy are you doing here?" Instinctively she darted a glance at the door, at the visiscreen.

He laughed and stretched out his arms.

"My shy girl! I have permission to call on you, my love. I'm running over to Capetown this afternoon, and I find I'll have to stay and look over Bloemer's stuff, so I can't get back till tomorrow."

As always, Kathrin felt a brief twinge of envy of Jon's mobility. In a sense he was a World Government employee, commissioned to find and evaluate the latest compositions in fourteen-tone scale music, and was likely at any moment to hop to Australia or Greenland. Kathrin, tied all her working life to office hours, and knowing few persons except Jon who weren't, often wondered what it would be like to be free to go here and there at will. Instead, she might find out soon what it would be like to be confined in a rehabilitation camp!

"Why didn't you just visicom to tell me you'd be gone for the night?"

"Because I couldn't kiss you good-by by visicom. Like this." He demonstrated thoroughly. "Great Sun, Kathrin, don't be such a roboty little mouse! Anybody'd think you'd broken a law, the way you tremble at every tiny breach of government regulations."

"Jon—" she said suddenly. If he only knew. No, this wasn't the time or the place. She would have a night alone now, to think how she could tell him.

"What?"

"Nothing, darling. Did you check to see if your overnight things were in the plane?"

"I did. Good-by, dearest. I'll be there when you get home tomorrow."

"Good-by, Jon. I hope you find Bloemer's wonderful."

He waved and was gone. Kathrin was alone with her problem again.

WHAT did one do when one had a problem too hard for one's own solution? Go to the Counselor, of course.

But would the Counselor help when a question of—almost of treason was involved? What was even more important, was the Counselor really safe? There was supposed to be only one copy

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made of the microfilm record, which the consultant took away with him. But suppose, unknown to ordinary citizens, a secret duplicate was made which went to the consultant's dossier in World Government files?

Kathrin had been to the Counselor twice before, once to have her talent evaluated, to see if it was worth while for her to take the intensive art training, once at the time she had first met Jon, when she had had a tempting offer of a position in Turkey to balance against the growing realization that Jon, whose work was based in America, was going to be one of the most important factors of her existence. Both times she had received sound advice and was glad to have followed it, and neither time had she heard any echo from the consultation. But this would be different.

Back in the suburban apartment, a hundred miles from the city, Kathrin set herself to serious meditation. For the first time in her life she really thought about unregistered children.

They were something people didn't talk about; something the poor creatures themselves couldn't hide, and that decent people pretended to ignore. How did they happen? Contraceptone never failed; either the mother must have let her injection date go by through pure stupid carelessness, or she had deliberately skipped it as Kathrin had done herself. But that meant that other women must be throwbacks too. She had a sudden vision of a vast, secret society of women whose atavistic emotions had impelled them into this dangerous adventure.

What about the fathers of the unregistered, she wondered. Men, of course, did not have to undergo contraceptone injections; any man might be chosen at any time by the Selection Board, and she had never heard of one who had refused his common civic duty. But had some of the fathers of unregistered children known and approved beforehand, hoping too for the impossible—were there male throwbacks as well as female? Or if they hadn't known, what a shock and grief when they learned about it, if they loved the women concerned! For inevitably as soon as the fact became unhidable, the woman was taken into custody, and as soon as the baby was old enough to be taken away from her and reared in a Pediatricum—with that dreadful red circle tattooed on its forehead, to make it recognizable for life—the mother was either sent to a rehabilitation camp or euthanized. The government could take no chances on upsetting the balance of nature by an epidemic of unregistered births.

Suddenly Kathrin remembered a tragedy of several years before—a couple she had known slightly, who were found dead in their apartment. The man had ray-gunned the woman and then himself, and nobody ever discovered why. Was that the reason? Had the woman confessed, and had this been his heartbroken way out? Kathrin thought of Jon, and shivered. What a fool she had been; what an impulsive fool. But she realized why she had not tried first to secure Jon's co-operation. The impulse had been too overwhelming. She could not risk his probable recoil and refusal.

Now it was too late.

No sleep-inducer vibrations did any good to Kathrin that night. But desperation brings its own calm.

HER VOICE was quite steady the next morning as she asked the Counseling Office for a special appointment. Fifty credit-units extra for not waiting her turn, but what did that matter?

The robot clerk in the waiting-room checked her number, then let her into the little room where the towering Counselor took up all of one wall. She shut the inward-locking door, peered through the one-way glass to watch the robot go back to its desk, and lay down on the long couch.

The Counselor lighted up immediately. The mechanical voice repeated her number, indicating that her dossier was before it for reference, and recited the

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opening formula: "This is a confidential consultation lasting one hour. What is your problem?" The microfilm began to pour out from the slot into the plastic container in which she would carry it away afterwards.

It was hard to begin. For a moment Kathrin had the embarrassing feeling that the Counselor was a human being, like the human psychoanalysts in ancient times she had read about. The voice had to reiterate: "What is your problem, please?"

Again, she felt with a sinking heart, she had been too precipitate. Most certainly she should have waited for Jon to come home; she should have told him everything, have made sure of his cooperation, before she made an appointment with the Counselor. But last night it had seemed such a wonderful inspiration. Now she must go on with it.

"As my dossier shows, Counselor," she began hesitantly, "I am by profession a maker of plasto-ceramics. Most of these have been designed for use as interior decoration or as house furnishings. But I have also made some advances in the use of plasto-ceramics as pure sculpture. I have twice won the World Prize for rhythmic three-dimensional art."

"All this is on record," said the Counselor, in what would have been an impatient tone if a machine could display emotion.

"Just so. My dossier also shows that for two years now I have been in unit-relation with Jon Grover, who is conceded to be the foremost authority on fourteen-tone scale music. Naturally we have talked much together about our separate arts.

"And now—" Kathrin took a deep breath and prepared for the plunge—"we are on the verge of something altogether new in cultural history—a synthesis of the two aspects of rhythmic force."

"The Counselor is not competent to give technical advice."

"That is not my—not our problem. It is that such a project requires much time and complete attention. It has become apparent that we shall not be able to bring it to fruition while both of us are actively engaged in our usual work."

"How much time would be required?"

"That is difficult to say. No one could even promise success in such an experiment; we might find in the end that it could not be accomplished at all. All I can say is that we feel we are on the right track, and that if we could have—oh, say a year, under suitable conditions and with the opportunity to devote ourselves exclusively to the task, without demands or interruptions of any sort, we should at least be able to demonstrate whether or not such a synthesis could be brought about."

"One can see the magnitude of such a discovery. It would be as important as was the color-touch synthesis of Stjern and Harasuki. You would both be willing to undergo a year of unmitigated isolation and distasteful privacy to conduct your experiment?"

KATHRIN'S heart beat fast. She stifled the joyful relief that rose in her. Throwback she might be, but she had been reared in this era; she knew very well its compulsive gregariousness, its horror of being alone even in couples.

"If that were the only condition," she said carefully, "our devotion to the progress of civilization is great enough to make us willing to endure even that."

"It might be possible," the Counselor said, "for you both to secure a year's leave of absence and for arrangements to be made for you to spend it in Patagonia."

"We would have to live in reasonable comfort, with facilities for our work," Kathrin interposed quickly.

"Your knowledge of geography is deficient," retorted the Counselor. "Patagonia, it is true, has been for some four hundred years preserved as an example of natural uninhabited terrain. But its climate has been adjusted to human requirements, and buildings have been

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erected for the use of visiting scientists from earth and the other planets. There is even a resident curator, who is a Martian, naturally, since Martians do not mind loneliness as human beings do. You could have one of those buildings, fully equipped for human habitation; your food and the materials and supplies you might need could be teleported to you on order; and of course you would be in visicom communication with all World Government areas.

"If you and Grover are willing to undertake this onerous task, and believe you could bear such isolation without physical or mental breakdown, application to the World Arts Department would probably be granted. The Counselor would add its own recommendation.

"But be very sure, before you apply, first that there is at least a good chance of your succeeding in this project, and secondly that you feel confident of your ability to endure the strain. Remember, not even the Martian curator nor the occasional visitors would be permitted to associate with you, and your visicom would be strictly censored so that you could use it only for utilitarian purposes, not for social communication."

"I understand."

"Make your application, then. The reputation you both possess in your respective fields of art will eliminate the need of any extensive inquiry or examination."

"There is one difficulty—"

"Oh, yes," replied the Counselor smoothly. "You mean your recent application to the Selection Board. It is the latest item in your dossier. Why did you do that?"

"It is hard to explain, I know. It was the outcome of discouragement. Discouragement with the prospects of being able to devote myself to this synthesis experiment, I mean," she added hastily. "Naturally I realize that to be chosen by the Selection Board is the highest social honor that could be given any citizen. So I thought, if I couldn't serve the World Government by advancing cultural progress, perhaps it would let me serve it by producing worthy offspring."

"And then you changed your mind? That does not augur very well for your psychological stability."

"I did not change my mind. Actually, as you will notice, I have not even really applied to the Board. All I have done is to ask them to send me the blanks. That does not commit me unless I send them in. What I wanted was to be provided with an alternative, if you could give me no hope of an opportunity to accomplish this other project."

"Citizen, you are a little too free with your individualistic schemes and actions. The government is willing to make allowances for the aberrancies of people with artistic talents, but you are in danger of carrying it too far. However, in view of the real importance of the project you have in mind, the government will probably let this too be adjusted. Your application to the Selection Board might be withdrawn without prejudice.

"But in your dossier there appears another serious discrepancy. You are two months overdue for your contraceptone injection."

"Yes, I—I let it go when I first thought of applying to the Board."

"Now that, citizen, is what is meant by carrying your individualistic tendencies too far. You must know the danger you have run by failing to keep your injections up to date. Suppose in consequence you had become pregnant? Then, no matter what your potential value to the community, it would have been necessary to treat you like any other lawbreaking woman who conceives an unregistered child.

"In fact, irrespective of this other matter of the synthesis experiment, it is imperative that some penalty be inflicted on you for this criminal carelessness.

"The Counselor will strongly recommend that you and Grover be given a

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year's leave in Patagonia, with full pay and maintenance, to make your experiment. But it will also recommend that, as a penalty for your disobedience to a fundamental law, you be debarred from the protection of contraceptone until after your return to civilization. You need a lesson in self-control, citizen. You will either exercise it during your leave, or you will take your chances on having an unregistered child, with all that that implies. And since, if that should happen, it would also obviously implicate your companion, he would incur the same consequences.

"Do you still wish to go ahead?"

"I still wish to go ahead," Kathrin said quietly.

She glanced at the ceiling, on which, as on every ceiling on earth, moving hands on a lighted dial told the time. Her hour was up.

"Your consultation with the Counselor is at an end," the voice intoned as the lights flicked off. Kathrin rose from the couch, picked up the microfilm container, and opened the door. The robot clerk checked her number as she passed its desk.

KATHRIN CLAYBORN and Jon Grover sat hand in hand at the view window of their twentieth-story suburban apartment, watching the peaceful countryside, with the moon making silver lace of the shadows of leaves on the river bank below them. Behind them, in the rosy glow to which they had switched the wall-tubes, music like a muted echo played a soft uninterrupting accompaniment to their voices. Kathrin had set the stage with infinite care. This was the final, crucial moment.

"Jon."

"Yes, darling?"

"You love me very much, don't you?"

"More than I have ever loved anyone in my life."

"I have something to tell you. I have

[*Turn page*]

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done something—perhaps you'll think it was dreadful. You may never forgive me."

He kissed her and laughed.

Then she told him.

There was a long silence. Kathrin sat stiffly, trying to master the trembling that had seized her whole body.

Through the long day many versions of Jon's possible response had passed before her mind. Sometimes, in moments of optimism, he cried: "You too? I never dared to hope! Now we'll fight it out together, we two—we three—!"

But in the version that came most often, a voice she did not recognize said bitterly: "You must be out of your mind. Had you no concern for your own work, or for mine? You have ruined them both, and us with them. This is 2952, not 1952. I fell in love with a thirtieth-century woman, not with a freakish reversion to the days of our primitive barbarian ancestors!"

NEVER, in her most fantastic guesses, had she been prepared for what he really did say.

"I know already, dearest. I know all about it. I've just been waiting for you to tell me yourself."

"You know? How could you?"

But of course. How had she been stupid enough to trust them, to believe that anything touching even the fringes of government could be really secret or confidential? Everything that had happened, everything she had said and done, had been taken down and put on file; and after her interview with the Counselor they had communicated with Jon immediately, before she could see him, wherever he had been, in South Africa or on his way home.

She turned to him uncertainly.

"Then what—"

He took her in his arms.

"It's all right, darling," he soothed her, his voice tender. "It was touch and go for a while; they gave me a real scare. They insisted you must be insane. You know what that would have meant." He shuddered. "But I used every bit of influence I have. I got some pretty important psychologists on the job right away, and we convinced the authorities it was only a temporary collapse from overwork and overstrain, such as might affect any highstrung artist. It helped a bit that this plasto-music synthesis you dreamed up really is quite logical—though at present it is also quite impossible.

"You're going to be perfectly safe; I have their absolute guarantee. Just a short stay in a mental hospital, and it will all be as if nothing had ever happened."

"But Jon—" Kathrin could scarcely find her voice. "You don't understand. I'm pregnant now—I told you that! They couldn't have known that."

"They guessed it, my dear," he said dryly. "But don't worry. That can be taken care of very easily; we're in plenty of time."

She looked at him, incredulous horror in her eyes.

"Jon—Jon—no! Our child!"

"Don't you understand, darling? You needn't *have* the child. You *never* need have one."

She tried once more, desperately.

"But I **want** it, Jon. That was my whole idea in getting the Counselor to back my plan—so that we could go to Patagonia together and then maybe escape on a space ship somehow and be together always—all three of us."

"Now, now, Kathrin! Don't you realize, dear, that this is all part of your mental upset? Just stop worrying and leave things to me. I've taken care of everything. It will be all right."

He held her to him, gently and firmly, and signaled with his head. His face twisted with loving concern, he handed her over—dazed, no longer protesting—to the two men in white uniforms who had been waiting in concealment.

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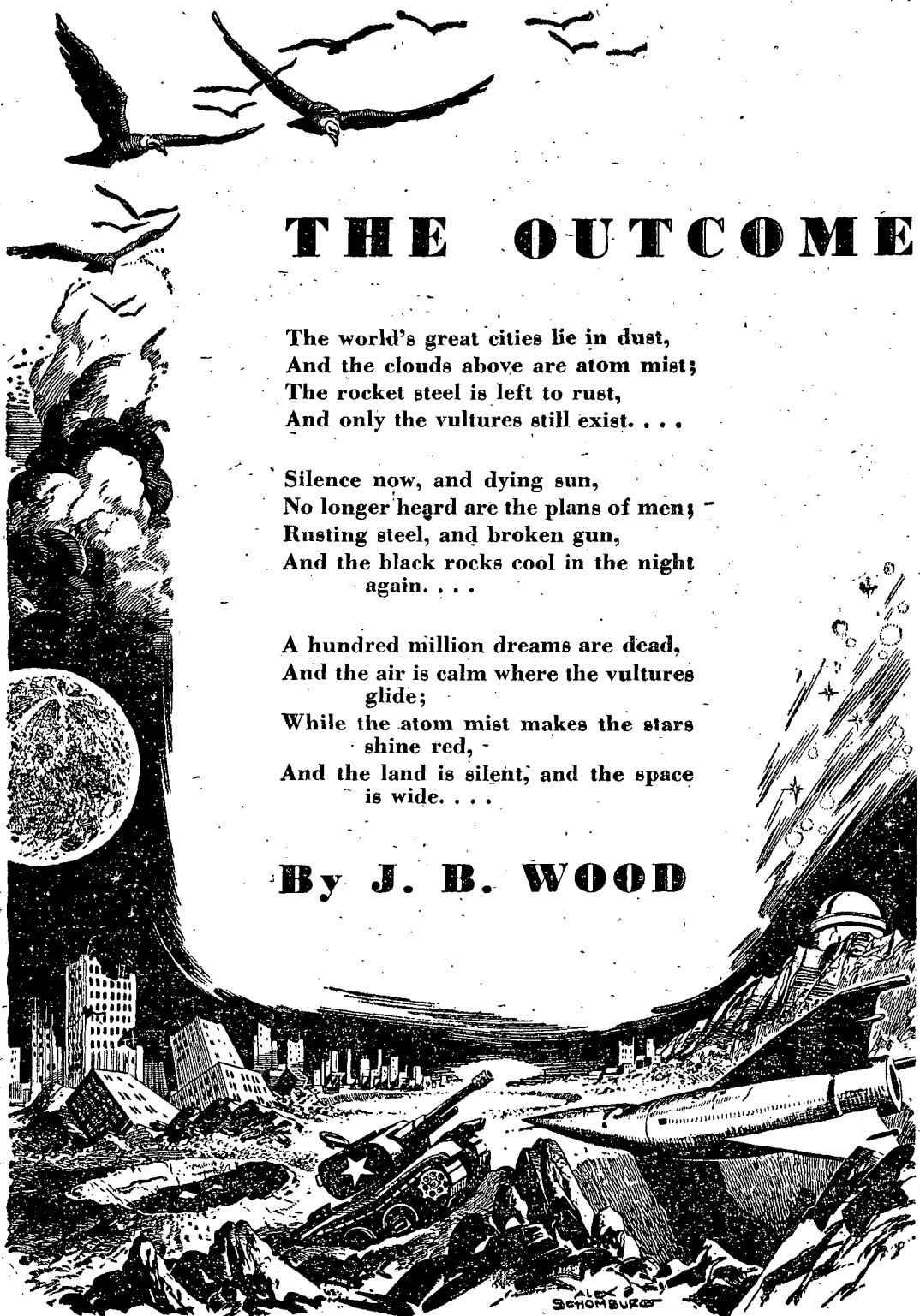

THE OUTCOME

The world's great cities lie in dust,
And the clouds above are atom mist;
The rocket steel is left to rust,
And only the vultures still exist. . . .

Silence now, and dying sun,
No longer heard are the plans of men;
Rusting steel, and broken gun,
And the black rocks cool in the night
again. . . .

A hundred million dreams are dead,
And the air is calm where the vultures
glide;
While the atom mist makes the stars
shine red,
And the land is silent, and the space
is wide. . . .

By J. B. WOOD

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Have an important appointment coming up?

Have to make a speech? Or make love?

Telagog will pull you through the crisis . . .

. . . by remote-control

He tried frantically to control his

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THE GUIDED MAN

a novelet by
L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

I

ALL you do," said the salesman for the Telagog Company, "is flip this switch at the beginning of the crisis. That sends out a radio impulse which is picked up here and routed by the monitor to the proper controller."

Ovid Ross peered past the salesman at the figure seated in the booth. Gilbert Falck, he understood the man's name to be; a smallish, dapper man who wore a shining helmet, from which a thick cable passed in a sagging catenary curve to the control-board before him.

"So he takes over?" said Ross.

"Exactly. Suppose you've let yourself in for a date where there'll be dancing, and you don't know how?"

"I do, kind of," said Ovid Ross.

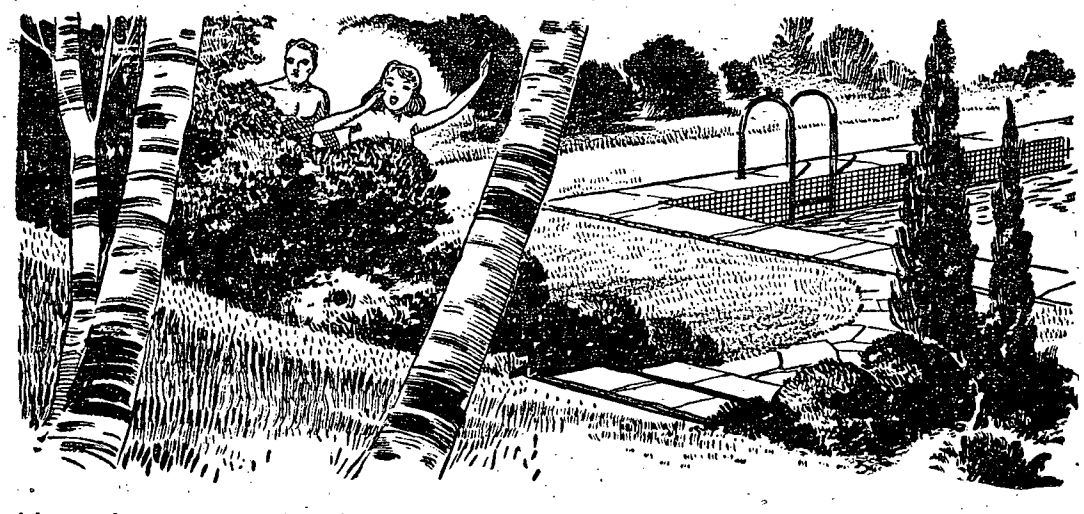
"Well, let's suppose you don't. We have in the booth, by prearrangement, our Mr. Jerome Bundy, who's been a ballet-dancer and a ballroom dancing teacher—"

"Did somebody call me?" said a man, putting his head out of another control-booth.

"No, Jerry," said the salesman, whose name was Nye. "Just using you as an example. Aren't you still on?"

"No, he gave me the over-and-out."

"See?" said the salesman. "Mr. Bundy is controlling a man—needless to say we don't mention our clients' names—who's trying to become a professional ballet-dancer. He's only so-so, but with Jerry running him by remote control he puts on the finest tour-jeté you ever saw. Or suppose you can't swim—"



right arm, but Bundy wouldn't let him

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OVID ROSS stared at his knuckles. He was a long, big-boned young man with hands and feet large even in proportion to the rest of him, and knuckles oversized for even such hands. "Shucks, I can swim and dance, kind of, and most of those things. Even play a little golf. My trouble is—well, you know."

"Well?"

"Here I am, just a big hick from Rattlesnake, Montana, trying to get on among all these slick operators in New York, where everybody's born with his hand in somebody else's pocket. When I go up against them it scares the behooligers out of me. I get embarrassed and trip over my big feet."

"In such a case," said Nye. "we choose controllers specializing in the rôles of sophisticate, man-of-the-world, and so forth. Our Mr. Falck here is experienced in such parts. So are Mr. Abrams and Mr. Van Etten. Mr. Bundy is what you might call a second-string sophisticate. When he's not controlling a man engaged in dancing or athletic sports he relieves one of the others I mentioned."

"So if I sign up with you, and tomorrow I go see this publisher guy who eats horseshoes and spits out the nails, to ask for a job, you can take over?"

"Easiest thing in the world. Our theory is: no man is a superman! So, when faced with a crisis you can't cope with, call us in. Let a specialist take control of your body! You don't fill your own teeth or make your own shoes, do you? Then why not let our experts carry you through such crises as getting a job, proposing to a girl, or making a speech? Why not?" Nye's eyes shone.

"I dunno why not," said Ross. "But that reminds me. I got—I've got girl trouble too. Can you really take care of that?"

"Certainly. One of the controllers is the former actor Wallace Wentworth, who during his youth was the idol of frustrated women throughout the nation, and who when not on the screen or the TV succeeded in acquiring nine real-life wives as well as innumerable less formal romances. We'll do the courtship, the proposal, and everything for you, in the most expert manner."

Ross looked suspiciously at the salesman. "Dunno as I like that 'everything'."

Nye spread his hands. "Only at your request. We have no thought of controlling a client beyond his desires. What we do is to compell you to do what you really wish to do, but lack the skill or the nerve to do."

"Say, there's another thing."

"Yes?"

"Is there any carry-over effect? In other words—uh—if a controller puts me through some act like swimming, will I learn to do that better from having the controller do an expert job with my carcass?"

"We believe so, though the psychologists are still divided. We think that eventually telagog control will be accepted as a necessary part of all training for forms of physical dexterity or skill, including such things as singing and speech-making. But that's in the future."

"Another thing," said Ross. "This gadget would give a controller a wonderful chance for—uh—practical jokes. Say the controlee was a preacher who hired you to carry him through a tough sermon, and the controller had it in for him, or maybe just had a low sense of humor. What would stop the controller from making the preacher tell stag-party stories from the pulpit?"

The salesman's face assumed a look of pious horror. "Nobody in this organization would think of such a thing! If he did he'd be fired before he could say 'hypospatial transmission.' This is a serious enterprise, with profound future possibilities."

Ross gave the sigh of a man making a fateful decision. "Okay, then. Guess I'll have to go without lunch for a while to pay for it, but if your service does what you say it'll be worth it. Give me the forms."

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WHEN Ross had signed the contract with the Telagog Company, the salesman said: "Now we'll have to decide which class of telagog receiver to fit you with. For full two-way communication you use this headset with this hypospatial transmitter in your pocket. It's fairly conspicuous. . ."

"Too much so for me," said Ross.

"Then we have this set, which looks like a hearing-aid and has a smaller pocket control unit. This doesn't let you communicate by hypospatial broadcast with the controller, but it does incorporate an off-switch so you can cut off the controller. And if you have to communicate with him you can write a note and hold it up for him to see with your eyes."

"Still kind of prominent. Got any others?"

"Yes, this last kind is invisible for practical purposes." The salesman held up a lenticular object about the size of an eyeglass lens but thicker, slightly concave on one face and thin around the edge. "This is mounted on top of your head, between your scalp and your skull."

"How about controls?"

"You can't cut off the controller, but you can communicate by clicks with this pocket wireless key. One click means 'take over', two is 'lay off but stand by', and three is 'over-and-out' or that's all until the next schedule. If you want to arrange a more elaborate code with your controller that's up to you."

"That looks like me," said Ross. "But have you got to bore holes in my skull for the wires?"

"No. That's the beauty of this Nissen metal. Although the wires are only a few molecules thick, they're so strong that when the receiver is actuated and their coils are released they shoot right through your skull into your brain without making holes you can see except under the strongest microscope."

"Okay," said Ovid Ross.

"First we'll have to fit you and install the receiver. You'll take a local anesthetic, won't you?"

"I guess so. Whatever you say."

"Then you'd better have a practice session with your controllers. They have to get used to your body, you know."

"Rather," said Gilbert Falck, taking off his helmet. "You wouldn't want me to knock your coffee-cup over because your arm is longer than mine, would you?"

II

THE gold lettering on the frosted-glass part of the door said:

1026

HOOLIHAN PUBLICATIONS

THE GARMENT GAZETTE

Ovid Ross had stood in front of this door for fifteen awful seconds with his hand outstretched but not quite touching the knob, as if he feared an electric shock. God almighty, why did one have to be young and green and embarrassable? And from Rattlesnake, Montana? Then he remembered, reached into his pocket, and pushed the switch-button. Once.

He remembered what he had been taught: as the controller took over, relax gradually. Not too suddenly or you might fall in a heap on the floor, which would not make a favorable impression on a prospective employer.

The feeling of outside control stole over him with an effect something like that of a heavy slug of hard liquor. He relaxed. A power outside his body was seeing with his eyes and sensing with his other senses. This power reached his arm out and briskly opened the door. Without volition on his part he realized that he had stridden in and said to the girl at the switchboard behind the hole

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in the glass window, in friendly but firm and confident tones:

"Will you please tell Mr. Sharpe that Mr. Ross is here to see him? I'm expected."

Ross thought that unaided he would have stumbled in, goggled wordlessly at the girl, stuttered, and probably ended by slinking out without seeing Sharpe at all. The control was not really complete—semi-automatic acts like breathing and walking were still partly under Ross's control—but Falck had taken over all the higher functions.

Presently he was shaking hands with Addison Sharpe, the managing editor, a small man with steel-rimmed glasses. Ross amazed himself by the glibness with which his tongue threw off the correct pleasantries:

"A very nice plant you have, sir. . . I'm sure I shall enjoy it . . . yes, the salary mentioned by the agency will be satisfactory, though I hope eventually to convince you I'm really worth more . . . references? Mr. Maurice Vachek of *The Clothing Retailer:* Mr. Joseph McCue of A. S. Glickman Fabrics. . ."

And not a word to indicate that this same McCue had pounded his desk and shouted, when firing Ovid Ross: "And here you are, a college man, who couldn't sell bed-warmers to Eskimos! What the hell good's your fancy education if it don't teach you nothing useful?"

Luckily McCue had promised to give him a good reference—provided the job were anything but selling. Ross was pleased to observe that his body's deportment under Falck's control, while much improved, was not altered out of all recognition. He still spoke his normal General American instead of Falck's more easterly accents, though whether this was the result of deliberate mimicry on Falck's part or the persistence of his lifetime neural habits he did not know.

Addison Sharpe was saying: "You'll find working conditions here a little unusual."

"So?" said Falck-Ross.

"For one thing, Mr. Hoolihan likes neatness. That means everybody cleans his desk completely before he goes home at night. Everything but the telephone, the calendar, the ash-tray, and the blotter-pad has to be out of sight."

ROSS felt his supposedly imperturbable controller start a little, and no wonder! This would be Ovid Ross's third trade-journal, and never before had he come across such a ruling. Normally staff-writers and editors were allowed to build mares' nests of paper on their desks to suit themselves, so long as they delivered the goods.

"For another," continued Sharpe, "Mr. Hoolihan disapproves of his employees' fraternizing with each other outside of working hours. He considers it bad for discipline."

At this outrageous ukase Ross felt Falck jerk again.

"Finally," said Sharpe, "Mr. Hoolihan has a very acute sense of time. He takes it much amiss if his employees show up so much as one minute late, so that the rest of us make a habit of arriving fifteen minutes early in the morning to allow for delays. Also I advise you not to get in the habit of taking your newspaper down to the men's room to read, or ducking out for a mid-morning cup of coffee. The staff-writer you're replacing thought he couldn't live without his ten-o'clock coffee, which is why you're here and he isn't."

Ross had an urge to ask how you got to be a trusty, but he had no control over his vocal organs and Falck was too well-trained for any such breaks.

"Now," said Sharpe, "we'll go in to see Mr. Hoolihan."

The tyrant overflowed his swivel-chair: a big red-faced man with a fringe of graying hair around his pink dome of a scalp and great bushy eyebrows. Timothy Hoolihan extended a paw and wrung Ross's hand, making the bones creak despite the fact that Ross had gotten his start in life by pitching hay and throwing calves around.

"Glad to have you!" barked Hoolihan

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in a staccato voice like a burst of machine-gun fire. "You do as we tell you, no reason we can't get along. Here! Read this! Part of every new employee's indoctrination. Ever hear of Frederick Winslow Taylor? Should have! Hundred years old and still makes sense."

Falck-Ross glanced down at the brochure: a reprint of an ancient homily by Taylor on the duties of an employee.

"Now, you hang around a couple of days, reading the files, getting oriented, and then we'll put you on a definite assignment. Good luck! Take him away, Addison!"

Overawed by this human dynamo, Ross was conscious of Falck's making some glib but respectful rejoinder and then took him around and introduced him to a half-dozen other people: staff-writers (called "editors" on this paper), an advertising manager, and so forth. Then Sharpe showed Ross a cubicle with a desk.

"Yours," he said. "Say, are you feeling all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I don't know. When we came out of Mr. Hoolihan's office your manner seemed to change. You're not sick, are you?"

"Never felt better."

"Heart all right? We wouldn't like you to conk out on us before you've worked long enough to pull your weight."

Fast, Furious and Funny

ARE you a timid soul? Do you watch your more aggressive brothers make their brash and self-confident way through life with envy and awe? Do you wish that you could change places with them once in a while and be a big operator—sure and confident and glib?

Ovid Ross did. He was a hick from Rattlesnake, Montana. He was overawed by the New York sharpies. What happened to Ross shouldn't happen to you—but then you are not likely to run afoul of the Telegog Company, an outfit that makes lions out of lambs-by-remote-control. You sign up with Telegog, you wear a gadget like a hearing aid, and an expert sitting at a control panel back in the office takes you over and makes you talk and act like a combination of man-eating tiger and walking encyclopedia.

The trouble is that even an expert can get too brash—so Ovid Ross found. And the result is one of the funniest stories de Camp has ever written. No kidding. Or rather, plenty of kidding. Have a look.

—*The Editor*

directing his body out of the office. For the first time since he had entered the office suite occupied by *The Garment Gazette*, Ross began to try to regain control. He urged his right hand towards the pocket in which reposed the little clicker-key by which he communicated with Falck. Evidently Falck realized what he was up to, for he relaxed control long enough for Ross to get his hand into that pocket and press the knob. Twice.

AT ONCE Falck's control ceased. Ross, not catching himself quite in time, stumbled and recovered. Sharpe turned his head to give him an owlish stare,

"No, sir. My heart was good enough for me to be a practicing cowboy, so I guess this won't hurt it."

Ross settled down at his new desk to read the Taylor article, the burden of which seemed to be that to get ahead one should practice abject submission to one's employer's slightest whim. While he was absorbing the eminent engineer's advice to become the complete yes-man, one of the girls came in and placed on his desk a big ring-binder containing last year's accumulation of file-copies of *The Garment Gazette*, which he read.

What Mr. Hoolihan really needed, he thought, was a multiple telagog set by which he could control all his employees

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all at once and all the time.

During the lunch hour Ovid Ross telephoned the Telagog Company and asked for Gilbert Falck. After some delay a voice said:

"Falck speaking."

"This is Ross, Ovid Ross. Say, it worked! I got the job!"

"Oh, I know that. I monitored you for a half-hour after you shut me off, and cut in on you at odd minutes later."

"Oh. But say, I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated it. Uh. It's wonderful. Could I—could I blow you to a drink this evening after work?"

"Wait till I look at my schedule . . . okay, five to six is free. Drop by on your way from work, eh?"

Ovid Ross did. He found Falck, in line with his rôle as professional man-of-the-world, cordial but not unduly impressed by his accomplishment in getting Ross a job. When the first pair of drinks had been drunk Falck bought a second round. Ross asked:

"What I don't see is, how on earth do you do it? I have a hard enough time managing things like that for myself, let alone for some other guy."

Falck made an airy motion. "Experience, my lad, practice. And balance. A certain mental coordination so you automatically roll with the punch and shoot for every opening. I've got rather a tough case coming up tomorrow. Client wants to put over a merger, and it'll take all my *savoir faire* to see him through it." He sipped. "Then, too, the fact that it's not *my* job or *my* business deal or *my* dame helps. Gives me a certain detachment I mightn't have about my own affairs."

"Like surgeons don't usually operate on their own kinfolk?"

"Exactly."

Ovid Ross did some mental calculations, subtracting the employment agency's fee and the charges of the Telagog Company from his assets, and decided that he could afford to buy one more round. By the time this had been drunk he was in excellent spirits. He said: "I don't think I'll need any control for the next day or two, but as soon as I get oriented they're liable to send me out on an interview. So you better stand by."

"Okay. Try to call me a little in advance to brief me. I want to cut Bundy in on your sensory circuits in case he has to substitute for me."

III

WHEN he got to the YMCA where he lived, Ovid Ross telephoned a White Plains number and got an answer in a strong Russian accent:

"Who is cullink, pliz?"

"Mr. Ross would like to—uh—speak to Miss La Motte."

"Oh. Vait." Then after a long pause: "Is that you, Ovid?"

"Uh. Sure is. Know what? I got the job!"

"Splendid! Are you working now?"

"Yeah. It's a high-powered place as trade-journals go. I only hope I can stand the boss."

"Don't you like him?"

"No, and neither does anybody else. But it's money. Say, Claire!"

"Yes?"

"I met a swell guy. Name of Falck. A real man-of-the-world. Knows his way around."

"Good. I hope you see more of him."

"How are the wild Russians?"

"About the same. I had a terrible row with Peshkova."

"Yeah? How come?"

"I was teaching the boys American history, and she claimed I wasn't putting enough dialetical materialism into it. Said I should have explained that the American Revolution was a plot by the American bourgeoisie to acquire exclusive exploitation of the masses instead of having to share it with the British aristocracy. And I said a few things about if even the Russians had given up that line, why should I teach it? We were yelling at one another when Peshkov came in and made peace."

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"Has he made any more passes?" asked Ross anxiously.

"No, except to stare at me with that hungry expression all the time. It gives me the creeps."

"Well, some day. . . ." Ross's voice trailed off. He wanted to say something like: "Some day I'll marry you and then you won't have to tutor an exiled ex-commissar's brats any more."

But in the first place he was too shy, in the second he did not know Claire La Motte well enough, and in the third he was not in a position to undertake extensive financial commitments.

"Did you say something?" inquired Claire.

"No—that is—uh—I wondered when we'd get together again."

"I know! Are you busy Sunday?"

"Nope."

"Then come on up here. The Peshkovs will be gone all week-end and the hired couple are going down to Coney. Bring your friend Mr. Falck, and his girl-friend if he has one."

"Uh? Swell idea! I'll ask him."

Claire La Motte gave Ross directions for reaching the estate which the Peshkovs had bought in Westchester County, and hung up. Ovid Ross sat staring at the telephone. He had been hoping for such an invitation. Ever since he had met Claire the previous winter she had promised to have him to the Peshkovs' place in May or June, and now June was almost over. But the Peshkovs had never absented themselves long enough.

Then his old fear of embarrassment—erythrophobia, a psychologist had told him—rose up to plague him. Suppose Falck rebuffed his invitation? The thought gave him shivers. If only he could tender the invitation while under telagog control! But since Falck was his regular controller, he could hardly work it that way. And, having promised Claire, he would have to go through with this project.

THROUGH Wednesday and Thursday, orientation continued at *The Garment Gazette*. Ross read proof, helped Sharpe with makeup, and wrote heads: AUSTRALIAN WOOL DOWN; FALL FASHIONS FEATURE FUCHSIA; ILGWU ELECTS KATZ.

Friday morning Addison Sharpe said: "We're sending you out this afternoon to interview Marcus Ballin."

"The Outstanding Knitwear man?"

"Yes."

"What about? Anything special?"

"That's what you're to find out. He called up to say he was planning something new in shows. First he talked to Mr. Hoolihan, who got mad and passed the call on to me. Ballin asked if we'd like to run a paragraph or two on this show, so I said I'd send a man. Heffernan's out so you'll have to take care of it."

"I'll do my best," said Ross.

Sharpe said: "It's about time we ran a feature on Marcus anyway. Quite a versatile and picturesque character."

"What's his specialty?"

"Oh, he plays the violin and once went on an expedition he financed himself to find some bug in South America. Take the portrait Leica along and give him the works. His place is at 135 West Thirty-Seventh Street."

Ovid Ross telephoned the Telagog Company and made a luncheon date with Gilbert Falck. During lunch he told what he knew of his impending ordeal, and Falck found a spot on his schedule when he could take charge of the interview.

Ross also screwed up his nerve to pass on Claire's proposal for the week-end to Falck, who said:

"Thanks, rather. I shall be glad to. Shall we go in your car or mine?"

"Mine, since I made the invitation."

"Fine. I'll get a girl."

"Hey!" said Ross. "If you come along to Westchester you can't be in your booth controlling me if I run into an embarrassing situation."

Falck raised his blond eyebrows. "What's embarrassing about a picnic with your best girl?"

"Oh, you know."

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"No, I don't, unless you tell me."

Ross twisted his fingers. "I don't know her awfully well, but I think she's —she's—uh—well, I suppose you'd say I was nuts about her. And—and I always feel like I'm making a fool of myself."

Falck laughed. "Oh, that. Jerry Bundy's on Sunday, so I'll tell him to monitor you and be ready to take over."

Ross said: "Should call yourselves the John Alden Company."

"Huh? Who's he?"

"Guy in a poem. Skip it."

They parted, and Ross plunged back into the swarming garment district. He killed time, watching sweating shipping-clerks push hand-trucks loaded with dresses past, until his controller returned to his booth and came on the hypospace. Then Ross sent in the signal.

MARCUS BALLIN (Outstanding Knitwear: sweaters, T-shirts, bathing-suits) was a medium-sized man with sparse gray hair and somewhat the air of one of the more amiable Roman emperors. Ovid Ross soon learned that his trepidations about having the man insult him or clam up had been needless. Marcus Ballin loved to talk, he was a fascinating talker, and best of all he loved talking about himself. Over the background racket of the knitting-machines in the suite of lofts that comprised his empire, Ballin, with eloquent gestures of his cigar, poured into Falck-Ross's ears the story of his many activities—his travels, his fun with his airplane and his violin, his charitable and settlement work—until Ross, a prisoner for the nonce in his own skull, wondered how this man of parts found time to be also one of the most successful garment-manufacturers in New York.

Falck-Ross said: "But, sir, how about that special show?"

"Oh, that." Ballin chuckled. "Just a little stunt to help my fall line. I'm putting on a show for the buyers with a contest."

"A contest?"

"Absolutely. To choose the most beautiful bust in America."

"What? But, Mr. Ballin, won't the cops interfere?"

Ballin laughed. "I wasn't intending to parade the girls in the nude. Nobody in the garment trade would encourage nudism; he'd be ostracised. They'll all be wearing Outstanding sweaters."

"But how can you be sure some of 'em aren't—ah—boosting their chances by artificial means?"

"Not this time. These sweaters will be so thin the judges can tell."

"Who are the judges?"

"Well, I'm one, and I got the artist Roy Colonna for the second. The third I haven't picked out. I called that stuffed-shirt publisher of yours, but he turned me down. Let me see. . . ."

"Mr. Ballin," Ross to his horror heard his own vocal organs say, "I'm sure I should make a good judge."

Ovid Ross was horrified for three reasons: first, because to judge so intimate a matter in public would embarrass him to death; second, because he thought it would impair his standing wtih Claire La Motte if she found out; finally, he would never, never come right out and ask anybody for anything in that crass way. He struggled to get his hand on the switch, but Gilbert Falck kept the bit in his teeth.

"Yeah?" said Ballin. "That's an idea."

"I've got good eyesight," continued Falck, ignoring the mental squirmings of Ross, "and no private axes to grind. . . ."

Falck continued his line of sales chatter until Ballin said: "Okay, you're in, Mr. Ross."

"When is it to be?"

"Next Thursday. I've already got over thirty entries, but next year if I repeat it there ought to be a lot more. We'd have to set up some sort of preliminary screening."

Falck wound up the interview and took Ross's body out of the Outstanding Knitwear offices. Ross heard his body say:

"Well, Ovid old boy, there's an oppor-

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tunity most men would fight tooth and nail for. Anything to say before I sign off? Write it on your pad."

As Falck released control, Ross wrote a couple of dirty words on the pad, adding: "You got me into this; you'll have to see me through."

Falck, taking over again, laughed. "Rather! I have every intention of doing so, laddie."

IV

BACK at the *Gazette*, Addison Sharpe whistled when he heard Ross's story. He said:

"I don't know how the boss will like your getting in on this fool stunt. He turned Ballin down in no uncertain terms."

"I'd think it would be good publicity for the paper," said Ross.

"Well, Mr. Hoolihan has funny ideas; quite a Puritan. You wait while I speak to him."

Ross sat down and wrote notes on his interview until Sharpe returned and said: "This way, Ovid."

The managing editor led him into Hoolihan's office, where the advertising manager was already seated. Hoolihan barked:

"Ross, call up Ballin and tell him it's no go! At once! I won't have my clean sheet mixed up in his burlesque-act!"

"But Mr. Hoolihan!" wailed the advertising manager. "Mr. Ballin has just taken a whole page for the October issue, and if you insult him he'll cancel it! And you know what our advertising account looks like right now."

"Oh?" said Hoolihan. "I don't let advertisers dictate my editorial policies!"

"But that's not all. Mike Ballin, his brother—or rather one of his brothers—is the bigshot at the Pegasus Cutting Machine Company, another advertiser."

"Hm. That's another story."

As the great man pondered his problems, the advertising manager added slyly: "Besides, if you don't let Ross judge, Ballin will simply get somebody from *The Clothing Retailer* or *Women's Wear* or one of the other sheets, and they'll get whatever benefit—"

"I see," interrupted Hoolihan. "Ross! You go through with this act as planned, but heaven help you if you bring us any unfavorable notoriety! Keep yourself in the background. Play it close to your chest. No stunts! Get me? All right, back to work!"

"Yes, Mr. Hoolihan," said Ovid Ross.

"Yes, Mr. Hoolihan," said Addison Sharpe.

"Yes, Mr. Hoolihan," said the advertising manager, not because the comment was called for but out of sheer habit.

OVID ROSS spent most of Saturday shining up his small middle-aged convertible and touching up the nicks in the paint until anybody who did not keep track of yearly automobile style-changes might have been fooled into thinking that this was last year's model instead of last decade's. He had to journey up to the Bronx to get to it, because automobile storage fees had become prohibitively high in Manhattan.

Sunday morning the sky was so overcast that Ross had doubts about his party. The paper however said: "fair, warm, and humid," and by the time he went all the way up again by subway, got the car, and drove back to Manhattan to pick up Falck and his girl, the sun was burning its way through the overcast. He did not tell them that he had gone so far, preferring to let them think that he could afford to stable his car in Manhattan.

Falck directed Ross to drive around to a brown-stone front house in the west seventies to get the girl, whom he introduced as a Miss Dorothea Dunkelberg. She was a plump girl, very young-looking, and pretty in a round-faced, slightly bovine way; the kind whom their elders describe as "sweet" for want of any more positive attribute.

They spun through a hot humid forenoon up the Westchester parkways to the Peshkov estate near White Plains. As they turned in the driveway between

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the stone posts, Falck said:

"These Russkys rather did all right by themselves, didn't they?"

"Yeah," said Ross. "When they liquidated all the Commies in the revolution of '79, Peshkov was Commissar of the Treasury or something and got away with a couple of trunkloads of foreign securities."

"And he's been allowed to keep them?"

"The new Russian Commonwealth has been trying to get hold of that dough ever since, but Peshkov keeps it hidden away or tied up in legal knots."

"And your Miss La Motte tutors his kids?"

"That's right. She doesn't like 'em much, but it's money."

"Why, what sort of folks are they?"

"Well, to give you an idea, Peshkov's idea of a jolly evening is to sit all alone in his living-room with a pistol on the table beside him, drinking vodka and staring into space. Claire tells me he's been getting moodier and moodier ever since those anti-Communist Russians tried to assassinate him last year."

A tremendous barking broke out. Around the corner of the house streaked a half-dozen Russian wolfhounds with long snaky heads thrust forward and long legs pumping like steel springs. The dogs rushed to where the automobile was slowly crunching up the winding gravel driveway and began racing around it like Indians circling a prairie-schooner.

"Do we have to fight our way through those?" said Dorothea Dunkelberg. "They scare me."

"Claire will handle 'em," said Ross with more conviction than he felt. "She says they're friendly but dumb."

The sun glinted on red hair as a figure in a play-suit appeared beside the mansion. Claire La Motte's voice came shrilly:

"Ilga! Olga! Come here! Here, Dmitri! Behave yourself, Anastasia!"

The dogs quieted and loped off towards the house, where the girl seized a couple by their collars and dragged them out of sight around the corner, the others following. Presently Claire appeared again and waved an arm towards the parking-space. Ross parked and got out.

As Claire La Motte approached the car, Ovid Ross reached into his pocket and pressed his switch-button, once. Now, he hoped, he would show up all right in comparison with his slick friend Falck!

HE FELT Jerome Bundy take over his body and stride it towards the approaching Claire. Behind him he heard a faint wolf-whistle from Falck. Instead of formally shaking hands with her and mumbling something banal while his ears pinkened and his knuckles seemed to swell to the size of baseballs, Ross heard his body bellow:

"Hi there, beautiful!"

Then it clamped its hands around Claire's small waist and hoisted her to arms' length overhead. He let her drop back into his arms, briefly hugged the breath out of her, and dropped her to the ground. As he did so he thought he caught a smothered murmur:

"Why, Ovid!"

At least, thought Ross, he was glad that Bundy hadn't made him kiss her or spank her behind. It was all very well for his controller to take an attitude of hearty familiarity—at least she had not shown signs of active resentment yet—but that sort of thing could easily be carried too far. Popular mythology to the contrary notwithstanding, many girls really disliked caveman tactics.

Ross's body then affably introduced Claire La Motte to his new friends. Claire said:

"I thought we'd take a walk around the grounds and then eat a picnic lunch on the edge of the pool. Then later we can take a swim."

"Okay," said Bundy-Ross. "Gil, grab the suits and towels."

Falck brought these objects out of the rear seat of the car and walked after the others.

"Over that way," said Claire, pointing over the trees, "is the Untereiner estate.

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The Wyckman estate used to be beyond it, but now they're putting up apartment houses on it."

There were the conventional murmurs about the never-ending growth of New York's commutershed, both in size and in population. Claire continued:

"And over that way is the MacFadden estate, only the Mutual Fidelity bought it as a club for their employes. And in that direction is the Heliac Health Club."

"What's that?" said Dorothea Dunkelberg.

"A nudist camp."

"Oh—I thought they weren't allowed in this state?"

"They aren't, but it's become so popular the law's not enforced any more. On the other hand it can't be repealed because the legislators are afraid certain religious groups would raise a fuss."

They started towards the pool when another outbreak of barking halted them. Claire wailed:

"Oh, goodness, they got out again! Dmitri has learned to work the latch with his paw!"

The borzois boiled around the corner of the mansion as if pursuing the biggest wolf in Siberia. One made a playful fifteen-foot spring with its forepaws against Gilbert Falck, sending the telagog controller rolling on the greensward. Towels and bathing-suits flew about, to be snatched up by the dogs and borne off fluttering. Claire screamed:

"Yelena! Igor! Behave yourselves!"

No attention did they pay. A couple raced off having a running tug-of-war with Dorothea Dunkelberg's suit, while another amused itself by throwing one of the bath-towels into the air and catching it again.

"Playful little fellows," said Falck, getting up and brushing the grass off his pants.

"Very," said Claire, and started to apologize until Falck stopped her.

"Not your fault, lassie. Don't give it a thought." Falck wiped a drop of sweat from his nose. "I'm going to miss those suits, rather. If you find them in the woods, not too badly tattered, you might send 'em back to us."

"Sticky, isn't it?" said Claire. "Anyway we still have the lunch."

"What's to keep these Hounds of the Baskervilles from raiding our food?" asked Ross's body.

"I don't know, until I can get them shut up again and tie the gate closed."

Dorothea said in her faint squeak: "Maybe we could sit in a row on the springboard. They'd be scared to come out over the water, wouldn't they?"

And so it was done. The smell of food attracted the dogs, who lined up on the edge of the pool and whined until Claire, with the men's help, collared them two at a time and led them back to their kennels.

V

GILBERT FALCK wiped his hands on his paper napkin and said: "Excuse me, people. I just remembered a 'phone call. May I use the Peshkov 'phone, Claire?"

He followed Claire into the Peshkovs' palatial living-room where a life-sized portrait of Stalin hung on the wall. As she was pointing out the telephone Falck casually captured her hand and said:

"I say, Claire, that sofa looks rather comfortable. Why don't we sit down and get better acquainted?"

Claire slipped her hand out of his and said: "You make your call, Gil; I have my other guests to entertain."

Falck sighed and called the Telagog Company. He got Jerome Bundy on the line and said:

"Jerry, your control is laying an egg again. He does all right while you control him, but the minute you let go he just sits staring at the dame with an expression like a hungry wolf."

"Well?"

"I rather thought the next time you take over you'd better give him a more aggressive and uninhibited pattern. The poor jerk will never get anywhere under his own steam."

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"I don't know," said Bundy dubiously. "I thought I was giving him an aggressive pattern. I don't want to queer his pitch by—"

"Don't worry about that. His girl just confided to me she wishes he weren't such a stick. Give him the works."

"Okay," said Bundy.

Falck walked out with a knowing grin. When he came in sight of the other three he called:

"Did somebody say something about tennis?"

Ovid Ross immediately switched his control back to Bundy. He had no illusions about his game; a powerful serve and a bullet-like forehand drive, but no control to speak of.

They made it mixed doubles, Ross and Claire against the other two. To his amazement Ross found his smashes going, not into the net or the wire as usual, but into the corners of the other court where nobody could touch them. Claire was pretty good, Dorothea rather poor, but Gilbert Falck excellent, with a cat-like agility that more than made up for his lack of Ross's power. The first set got up to 5-5, then 6-5, then 6-6, then 7-6. . .

Dorothea Dunkelberg wailed: "I can't any more, Gil. I'll pass out in this heat."

"Okay," said Falck smoothly. "No law says we have to. Boy, I rather wish we had those bathing-suits. Claire, the Commies wouldn't have some spares, would they?"

"I don't think so; they never keep old clothes. They say that in Russia nothing was too good for them and they expect to have it that way here."

They trailed down the little hill from the tennis-court and stood looking longingly at the clear pale-green water in the pool. Ross was aware that Bundy was wiping his forehead for him. Thoughtful of him. . .but then Ross was horrified to hear his controller say in that masterful way:

"Who wants bathing-suits? Come on, boys and girls, take your clothes off and jump in!"

"What?" squealed Dorothea.

"You heard me. Off with 'em!"

"Well, I have a suit—" began Claire, but Bundy-Ross roared:

"No, you don't! Not if the rest of us—"

THE next few minutes were, for Ovid Ross's impotent psyche, a time of stark horror. How he got through them without dying of an excess of emotion he never knew. He frantically tried to regain control of his right arm to reach his switch, but Bundy would not let him. Instead Bundy took off Ross's sport-shirt and shorts, wadded them into a ball, and threw them under the springboard, meanwhile exhorting the others to do likewise and threatening to throw them in clad if they refused. . . .

They were sitting in a row on the edge of the pool, breathing hard, splashing the water with their feet. Ross caught a glimpse of Falck looking at him with a curious expression, between displeasure and curiosity, as if something he had carefully planned had gone awry. The controller was showing a tendency to play up to Claire more than Ross liked, so that poor Dorothea was rather ignored. Ross heard Bundy say with his vocal organs:

"We want to be careful not to get that white strip around our middles burned."

"How about finishing that set now?" said Falck.

They got up and walked up the slope to the court. Bundy-Ross, whose serve it was, was just getting his large knobby toes lined up on the backline for a smash when a fresh outburst of barking made all turn. Claire cried:

"Damn! I'll bet they've gotten loose again."

"Isn't that a car?" said Dorothea.

"Oh gosh!" said Claire in a breathless voice as the sun flashed on a windshield down the driveway. "It's the Peshkovs! They weren't supposed to be here till this evening! What'll we do?"

"Make a dash for our clothes," said Falck.

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"Too late," said Claire as the purr of the car, hidden behind the mansion, grew louder and then stopped. "Run for the woods!"

She ran into the woods, the others trailing. There were ouches and damns as bushes scratched their shins and their unhardened soles trod on twigs. Dorothea said:

"Isn't that poison ivy?"

Falck looked. "I rather *think* it's Virginia creeper, but we'd better not take chances."

"Oh dear! I hope we don't find a hornets' nest."

Bundy-Ross said: "It would be more to the point to hope a nest of hornets doesn't find us."

They came to a wire fence. Ross heard Bundy say: "That's easy to climb over. Hook your toes over the wire, like this."

"Ouch," said Dorothea. "What's on the other side?"

"The Heliac Health Club," said Claire.

"Rather a bit of luck," said Falck, climbing. "The one place in Westchester County where we're dressed for calling."

ROSS thought desperately of the switch that would return control of his body to him. The switch was in the right side pocket of his shorts, and his shorts, along with his other clothes and those of his companions, lay in a heap under the springboard at the edge of the pool.

"Have you ever been here, Claire?" asked Dorothea.

"No, but I have an idea of the layout. This way."

They straggled again through the woods. Presently they found a trail. Dorothea shrieked at the sight of a garter-snake. Ross thought of a good wisecrack comparing this harmless little reptile with the more formidable serpents of his native Rattlesnake, Montana, but being still under remote control he could not utter it.

Claire led them along the trail until they came out of the woods on to a grassy field. On this field stood, in irregular rows, forty-odd canvas-covered platforms about the size and height of beds. On somewhat over half these platforms the guests of the Heliac Club sat or sprawled in the costume of their avocation, reading, talking, card-playing, or dozing. One scholarly-looking man, unadorned save for a pipe and pince nez, sat on the edge of his cot with a portable typewriter in his lap. Beyond, some people played volley-ball and others tennis. On the right rose the rear of an old exmansion; on the left a row of rather delapidated-looking one-room cabins could be seen.

As his eyes under Bundy's control took in the scene, Ovid Ross observed several things about the nudists. There were three or four times as many men as women. Most of the people were middle-aged and were certainly not there to show off their beauty, for many of the men were paunchy and the women pendulous. Ross, after the initial shock had passed off, became conscious of the white equatorial bands of himself and his companions compared to the uniform brownness of the sun-worshippers. A few of the latter, however, though well-browned elsewhere, displayed an angry red on the areas that gleamed white on his own party: the parts normally covered by shorts and halters.

"Good afternoon," said a voice, and Ross became aware of a severe-looking gray-haired woman, deeply and uniformly browned, confronting them. "Have you people registered and paid your grounds fee?"

"No, but. . . ." said Falck, then stumbled for words despite his professional suavity.

"Have you references?" said the woman. "We like to know who our guests are."

Ross expected his controller to step into the breach, but even the self-possessed Bundy appeared unable to cope with this situation.

Then Claire LaMotte took the woman aside and explained their predicament in low tones. Ross saw the woman's face

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melt into a smile, then a laugh. Bundy turned his head away to survey the rest of the scene.

VI

NEAR at hand on one of the platforms a well-built middle-aged man with sparse gray hair and the air of an affable Roman emperor smoked a cigar and read a newspaper. Ross was sure that he had seen the man before. The same thought must have occurred to his controller, for Ross's eyes stopped roving with the man right in the center of the field. The man looked up as if conscious of scrutiny. His gaze froze as it rested on Ross as if he, too, thought that he recognized Ross.

Ross heard his voice say: "Why hello, Mr. Ba—"

"Please!" said Marcus Ballin, with so earnest a gesture that Bundy stopped in the middle of the name.

"Everybody goes by first names only here," continued Ballin. "I'm Marcus, you're—uh—what was that first name of yours?"

"Ovid."

"Okay, Ovid. Come a little closer, please." Ballin lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. "For me it would be particularly bad if this got out. I'd be considered a traitor to my trade. Why, even the garment-trade magazines, yours for instance, run editorials knocking nudism."

"I shouldn't think they'd take it so seriously as that."

"No? Well, you're not old enough to remember when there was a straw hat industry. Where is it now? Gone, because men don't wear hats in summer any more. And women used to wear stockings in summer too. If everybody . . ." Balin spread his hands.

"What would happen if the word got around?" asked Bundy-Ross. "Would the cutters and operators and pressers line up in a hollow square while the head buyer at Sachs' cut off your buttons?"

"No, but I'd be ostracised at least. It would even affect my business contacts. And my particular branch of the industry, summer sports wear, feels the most keenly about it of any. So you'll keep it quiet, won't you?"

"Sure, sure," said Bundy-Ross, and turned to his companions. The rear elevation of the gray-haired woman was receding. Claire explained:

"She's gone to get a play-suit to lend me so I can go back and pick up our clothes."

Bundy-Ross introduced his companions by given names to Ballin, who said: "You've got nice taste in girls, Ovid. Claire should be a model. Did you ever try that, Claire?"

"I thought of it, but I'm not long and skinny enough for a clothes-model and not short and fat enough for an artists' model."

"Anyway Claire's too well-educated," put in Falck.

"To me you look just right," said Ballin. "Say, Ovid, why couldn't she be entered in my contest? The local talent" (he indicated the rest-of-the-club by a motion of an eyebrow) "isn't too promising."

"What contest?" said Claire.

Ballin started to explain, then changed his mind. "Ovid will tell you. I think you'd have an excellent chance, and there's a nice little cash prize. Three prizes, in fact."

"You certainly make me curious," said Claire.

Bundy-Ross said: "If she's a friend of mine, and I'm a judge, wouldn't it look kind of funny?"

"No, no. If Colonna and I thought you were favoring her we'd outvote you. Anyway it's my contest so I can run it as I please. When you can, take her aside and tell her about it."

THE gray-haired woman returned with a play-suit and presently Claire departed at a trot for the woods from which they had emerged. A few minutes later she was back with a bundle of clothes. Ross, as soon as he got his

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shorts on, strained to get his right hand into his pocket. Bundy let him do so and he pressed the button twice.

Under his own power Ross walked back along the trail. He lagged behind Falck and Dorothea so that he could begin an elaborate and groveling apology:

"Uh. Claire."

"Yes?"

"I'm—uh—awfully sorry. I don't—uh—know. . ."

"Sorry about what?"

"All this. This afternoon. I don't know what got into me."

"For heaven's sake don't apologize! I haven't had so much fun in years."

"You haven't?"

"No. I've had the time of my life. I didn't know you had it in you. By the way, what *is* this contest?"

A little confused, Ross told her about the contest to select the most beautiful bust. He expected her to spurn the suggestion with righteous wrath and outraged propriety. Instead she said:

"Why, that was sweet of him! I'm very much flattered." She glanced at her exhibit. "Tell him I'll be glad to enter if I can arrange to get off early enough Thursday."

Women, thought Ovid Ross, have no shame. As he climbed the fence he revised the intention he had held, to drop in at the offices of the Telagog Company, knock Mr. Jerome Bundy's block off, and demand that the company remove the receiver from his cranium forthwith. Bizarre though the actions of his controller might seem, they seemed to have added up to a favorable impression on Claire.

Moreover, this infernal contest still loomed ahead of him. While he could no doubt beg off from Ballin, such an act of pusilanimity would lower him in Claire's eyes. He'd better plan for telagog control during that crisis at least. He would however insist that they promise not to put his poor body through any startling stunts.

Back on the Peshkovs' grounds, as he neared his automobile, he was intercepted by a stocky man with an expressionless moonface. The man wore an old-fashioned dark suit and even a necktie, an article of haberdashery that had virtually disappeared from the wardrobe of the American male. Claire introduced the man as Commissar Peshkov—Bogdan Ipolitovich Peshkov. Behind the man hovered another of similar appearance, wearing the long-obsolete derby hat. From what he had heard, Ross took this to be Fadei, the chauffeur-bodyguard. Peshkov extended a limp hand.

"Glad to mit you Comrade," he said in a mournful voice, his expression not changing. "I awp you had a nice time."

Ross shook the hand, repressed an impulse to wipe his own hand on his handkerchief afterwards, collected his party, and drove off.

EARLY Thursday morning Gilbert Falck entered the offices of the Telagog Company when nobody else was present. There was not even a single controller carrying a client through an early-morning crisis. Without hesitation the young man got to work on the mechanism of his control-booth and Jerome Bundy's next to it.

With a screw-driver he removed the panel that covered the wiring at the front of the booth. He traced the wiring until he found a place where the return motor leads of his booth and that of Bundy ran side by side. With wire-cutters he cut both wires and installed a double-pole double-throw knife-switch. When the switch was down the controls would operate as usual; when it was up he would be controlling Bundy's client while Bundy would control his, though as the sensory circuits were not affected each would continue to see, hear, and feel the sensations of his own client.

Falck did not consider himself a heel and in most ways was not one, though perhaps a little too sharp and on the make for some people's taste. But he had fallen heavily for Claire La Motte, practically at sight, and deemed all fair in love if not in war. His effort to have Ross disgrace himself by uninhibited be-

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havior in Westchester had backfired so that Ross had ended up more solid with Claire than ever.

And Ross, while he had not exactly complained to the company, had asked them to go easy. This request had caused Falck's and Bundy's supervisor to glower suspiciously and warn the two controllers not to try stunts. Therefore Falck did not dare to undertake any direct bolixing of his client's actions or to ask Bundy to. He must work by a more subtle method.

He had already tried to date Claire by telephone, but she was free only on weekends and had been dated up solidly for the next two by Ross. After this afternoon's contest, however, some of those dates might no longer be so solid.

Falck measured the panel and with a hand-auger drilled two tiny holes in it. Then he looped a length of fish-line around the crosspiece of the knife-switch and pushed both ends back through the upper hole in the panel from the back; did likewise with another length of line through the lower hole; screwed the panel back into place, and tautened the lines.

Now he had only to pull hard on the upper double length of fish-line to pull the switch from the down to the up position. Then if he released one end of the line and reeled in the other he would remove the line entirely from the works and could stuff it into his pocket. Similar operations with the lower line would return the switch to its original position. Subsequently, when the excitement had died down, he would remove the panel again and take out the switch. There was a chance, of course, that the electricians would come upon the switch in checking for trouble, but Gilbert Falck was no man to boggle at risks.

VII

ABOUT ten on Thursday morning Ross's telephone in the *Gazette* offices rang.

"Ovid? This is Claire. You won't have to meet my train after all."

"Why not?"

"Because Peshkov's driving me down."

"That guy! Is he planning to attend the contest?"

"So he says. Would Mr. Ballin mind?"

"Hm. I don't think so, but I'll call him and straighten it out. I got—I've got influence with him. Is Peshkov coming alone?"

"Well, he wouldn't let his family be contaminated by this example of bourgeois frivolity, but he wants to bring Fadei."

"The goon? No sir! Tell him he'll be welcome (I think) but no bodyguards."

Ross called the Outstanding Knitwear Company and persuaded a dubious Marcus Ballin to let Peshkov attend the showing.

The contest took place in Marcus Ballin's showroom, directly underneath his lofts. Despite the swank décor, the noise and vibration of the knitting-machines came faintly through the ceiling to remind those present that knitwear did not materialize out of thin air but had to be made. The showroom had been fixed up something like a nightclub, with a stage about a foot high on one side and little round tables spread around in a double horseshoe.

There were somewhat over three hundred spectators present, including representatives from *The Clothing Retailer* and other garment-trade magazines. These distributed themselves around the tables, to which a group of hardworking servitors brought trayloads of cocktails and small edible objects on toothpicks.

While Mr. Ivory Johnstone's band from Harlem entertained the audience, Ballin and Ross lined up the contestants behind scenes. Each of the lovely ladies wore a lightweight Outstanding sweater. These sweaters were so sheer that to Ross they seemed practically non-existent, following every contour of their wearers' bodies with implacable fidelity. Under normal conditions this spectacle would have reduced Ross to a state of

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stumbling and stuttering embarrassment, but as Gilbert Falck was now operating his body he could give no external sign of his feelings.

With a worried frown Ballin said: "Say, Ovid, where's that little redhead of yours?"

"I'll look." Ross put his head around the end of the backdrop to look over the audience.

CLAIRE LA MOTTE and Bogdan Peshkov were just coming in, the latter the only man in the room wearing a coat. Peshkov said something that Ross could not catch over the distance and hubbub, patted Claire's arm, waved her towards the stage, seated himself at one of the tables, and imperiously beckoned a waiter. Claire started uncertainly towards the stage, then sighted Ross and walked quickly to where he stood.

Ballin said: "All right, Miss La Motte, here's your sweater. This is the third judge, Roy Colonna." He indicated a swarthy, muscular young man with a dense glossy-black beard who stood by with his hands on his hips. "Just step behind that curtain to put it on. Nothing under it, you know."

With these sweaters, thought Ross, it made little difference where she put it on. In looking over the talent Falck-Ross had already eliminated many of the girls. He had also picked several whom he expected to place high. Among these were (according to the badges pinned to their waists) Miss Loretta Day (née Wieniawski), the noted burlesque queen, and Miss Shirley Archer, a model from the Towers agency. Claire, the unknown amateur, would find stiff competition.

"Line up, girls," said Ballin. "Look at the girls next to you to make sure you're in alphabetical order. The A's are at this end."

A female voice down the line said: "Does M come before or after N?"

Ballin continued: "You introduce them first time around, Ovid. Here's the list. As you call each one I'll send her out. Make it snappy, so one's coming out wh e the previous one's going."

Then Ballin himself strolled out upon the stage, waited for applause to die down, and gave a little speech: "So glad to see you all here this fine summer day. . . ." (It was drizzling outside) ". . .our new line of fall sportswear. . . the preeminent position of the Outstanding Knitwear Company. . .an assortment of fine, healthy upstanding American beauties. . .will be introduced by one of the judges, Mr. Ovid Ross of *The Garment Gazette.*"

Ross came out in his turn. During the first few steps his spirit quailed within him, but after that he found that he did not mind. In fact, he thought, if Falck had not been controlling him he might have managed the act as well by himself.

As the girls came out he called their names: "Miss Wilma Abbott. . . Miss Miriam Amter. . . Miss Shirley Archer. . . ."

The spectators applauded each one—all but the ex-commissar. Bogdan Peshkov sat alone, his potbelly bulging out over his thighs, drinking down cocktails with great gulps, staring somberly at the scene and occasionally glancing nervously over his shoulder.

Ballin stood just out of sight of the spectators with a duplicate list in his hand, checking the girls' names as they filed past him so that there should be no mixups.

After the parade, all forty-six girls came out and lined up on the stage in a double rank. Ballin and Colonna came out too and the three judges prowled back and forth. The plan was that any judge who thought that any girl had a good chance should tap her on the shoulder, the idea being to reduce the contestants to a mere dozen or so. Falck-Ross tapped Claire LaMotte, Miss Archer, Miss Day, and a couple of other lovelies, some of whom rolled their eyes at him with a languishing expression as if to hint that if he would only choose them he might have his will of them.

Then they filed off again. As soon as they were off the stage a couple of those

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who had not been chosen dissolved into tears, causing their eye-makeup to run. Claire La Motte paused near Ross to murmur:

"Ovid, I don't like the look on Peshkov's face. He's drinking himself stiff, and he looks the way he did the night he shot all the panes out of the picture-window."

"Oh," said Falck-Ross.

"Can't you hurry this thing through before he gets worse?"

"It'll take half or three-quarters of an hour yet, but I'll do my best."

ROSS went back on the stage and the thirteen girls remaining in the contest paraded as before while Falck-Ross introduced them: "Miss Shirley Archer . . . Miss Loretta Day. . . Miss Mary Ferguson: . . ."

It did, as he had foreseen, take a lot of time, during which Peshkov's puddingface stared at him with unnerving blankness between cocktails.

After a consultation the judges eliminated all but three contestants: Shirley Archer, Loretta Day, and Claire La Motte, who then lined up on the stage. Falck-Ross began a whispered consultation with Ballin and Colonna. Left to himself Ross would have had trouble choosing among the three girls, though he thought that, aside from personal sentiments, Miss Day perhaps had a slight edge over the others.

Marcus Ballin, whose taste ran to cones, preferred Miss Archer, while Roy Colonna, whose bent seemed to lie in the direction of hemispheres, argued as stoutly for Miss Day. Falck spoke up for Miss La Motte on the ground that, presenting an intermediate or sphere-conoidal form, she embodied the golden mean.

Ballin and Colonna would not be budged. At last Ballin whispered:

"Put down your second and third choices. We can't stand here arguing all afternoon."

When the choices for the lesser places were written down it was found that both Ross and Ballin had named Miss Day for second.

"Okay," said Ballin. "Ovid and I will go along with you, won't you, Ovid? Day it is. Now we'll pick second and third prizes. I'd give La Motte second. . ."

Claire being chosen second, Miss Archer automatically took third. Ballin stepped to the edge of the stage with his arms up and cried:

"Ladies and gentlemen: By unanimous opinion of the judges, first prize in this great and unique Outstanding Knitwear Company bust-beauty contest is awarded to Miss Loretta Day—"

"Stop!" said a voice.

"What was that?" said Ballin.

"I said stop." It was Peshkov, erect and weaving. "De best-looking girl is obvious Miss Claire La Motte. To give de first prize to anodder von is obvious capitalistic injostice. I order you to change your decision. Oddervise, to de penal camps of Siberia!"

"What—what—" sputtered Ballin. Then he pulled himself and assumed an air fully as regal as that of the ex-commissar. He gestured to a couple of waiters:

"Remove this man!"

AT THAT moment, in one of the control-booths of the Telagog Company, Gilbert Falck reached forward and down, felt around until he had located his upper fish-line, and pulled. When he had drawn the line as far as it would go he let go one end and pulled on the other until he had the whole thing in his hands. He stuffed the string into his pants pocket. Now he was controlling Bundy's ballet-dancer while Bundy, unknowing in the next booth, was controlling his trade-journal staff-writer.

In a dance-studio, where the ballet-dancer was performing hopefully under the eyes of a troupe manager in the expectation of being hired, he suddenly fell to the floor. Questions and shaking failed to rouse him. He lay where he had fallen, staring blankly and making odd walking-motions with his legs and arms as if he

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were still erect.

At the same instant, while the waiters designated by Ballin as bouncers were staring apprehensively at their quarry, Ovid Ross took off in a tremendous leap from the stage and began bounding around the show-room, leaping high into the air to kick his heels together and flinging his arms about. Ross, imprisoned in his skull, was as astonished as anyone by this maneuver. He thought Falck must have gone mad, not knowing that he was now under Bundy's terpsichorean guidance.

Ross's astonishment changed to terror as he saw that he was bearing down on Bogdan Peshkov, who had produced an automatic pistol from under his coat and was waving it about in a distracted manner, shouting in Russian.

Bang! Glass tinkled. Ross took off in another leap that brought him down right on top of Peshkov. His body slammed into that of the ex-commissar. The two crashed into Peshkov's table and rolled to the floor in a tangle of limbs and broken glass and table-legs. Ross found that his body was still kicking and flapping its arms. A kick accidentally sank into Peshkov's paunch and reduced the Muscovite to a half-comatose condition.

Then the seizure left Ross's body and he rose to his feet fully under his own control. Everybody was talking at once. Several men gripped Peshkov while another gingerly held his pistol. Some spectators were crawling out from under tables.

Ross looked around, took a deep breath, and walked to the stage. Ballin was flapping his hands while Miss Archer had hysterics.

Ross faced the disorganized audience and bellowed: "Attention, everybody! All but those holding Mr. Peshkov take your seats. We shall now go on with the contest. Waiters, mop up the spilled liquor and see that everybody has what he wants. Mr. Ballin was announcing the final results when he was interrupted. He will continue from there. . . ."

So successful was Ross in restoring order that hardly a ripple of excitement was caused by the arrival of four policemen to take Peshkov away.

VIII

AFTER it was over, Ballin said: "You sure handled that, Ovid. How did you have nerve to jump on a man with a gun? That was reckless."

Ross made a depreciating movement. "Shucks, just an impulse, I guess. Too bad your show got kind of beat up, though."

"That's all right. We got the publicity."

"The only thing that worries me," said Ross, "is that Mr. Hoolihan's apt to think I got entirely too much publicity and fire me. Maybe you as a big advertiser could bring a little—uh—moral pressure if need be?"

Ballin drew on his cigar and looked sharply at Ross. He said:

"Ovid, I've been thinking. The way things stand you'll be tempted to try a little gentle blackmail on me because of the Heliac Club." As Ross started to protest, Ballin held up a hand. "The only way to make sure you don't, as I see it, is to make your interests identical with my own."

"Yes?"

"I've got a little venture-capital lying loose, and I've been thinking of starting a new trade-journal, something like *The Garment Gazette* but specializing in sportswear."

"You mean a house-organ?"

"God forbid! Nothing's duller than house-organs. This would be a regular general-circulation journal, run independently of the Outstanding Knitwear Company. The managing editor would have a free hand to call his shots as he saw them. How would you like the job?"

When Ross got his breath back he could only say: "Gosh, Mr. Ballin!"

"But your first assignment will have nothing to do with the magazine at all."

"Huh? What then?"

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"It will be to accompany me to the Heliac Health Club for a weekend of healthful relaxation. After that we'll be in the same boat!"

* * *

The following morning Ovid Ross turned in his story and pictures on the bust-beauty contest and gave notice. Timothy Hoolihan grumped about his pay's having been wasted, since Ross had not been on long enough to become useful.

"But Mr. Hoolihan!" said Ross. "Look at the opportunity! If I asked Mr. Ballin to wait a month he'd find somebody else. And didn't the Taylor article say to try to please your employer in all things, and isn't he my future employer?"

"Huh," snorted Hoolihan. "Suppose so. Damn it, I don't know what's the matter with this firm! We have the highest turnover of any trade-journal I know of. No sooner get 'em broken in than off they go!"

Ross could have told Hoolihan that his violent power-complex might have something to do with it, but forebore. It would only lead to an argument and he might want a reference from Hoolihan some day.

Then Ross walked across town to the Telagog Company and told the receptionist: "Uh — send in that salesman, that Mr. Nye."

The salesman came in full of apologies: "... and while of course you waived damages in your contract, we are so anxious to please you that we're offering you a one-year free extension of your three months' trial telagog subscription. Moreover Mr. Falck is no longer in our employ."

"What happened?"

"Our Mr. Bundy, whose wires were crossed with Mr. Falck's, suspected something and came in early this morning to find Falck taking out that switch he'd installed behind his panel. Falck, knowing how complicated hypospatial circuits are, had figured the electricians would get down to tracing the crossover this afternoon. Now about that extension—"

"Never mind. Just take this gadget out of my head, will you?"

"You mean you don't want any more telagog control?"

"That's right. I found I can do well enough by myself."

"But you don't know. Your erythrophobia may take you unawares—"

"I'll worry about that when the time comes. Right now I feel that with all I've been through in the past week, I can never be embarrassed again."

Nye looked dubious. "That's not psychologically sound."

"I don't care. That's the way it is."

"We're pretty busy today. Couldn't you come in again next week?"

"No—I'm getting married tomorrow and leaving on a two weeks'-trip, and starting a new job when I get back."

"Congratulations! Is it that Miss La Motte Bundy and Falck were talking about?"

"Yes."

"They said she was a pip. How did you manage it with your shyness?"

"When I walked her to the train I just asked her and she said yes. Simple as that."

"Fine. But after all, you know, a man's wedding-day and the night following it constitute a crisis of the first magnitude. With one of our experts at your personal helm you need not fear—"

"No!" shouted Ovid Ross, smiting the chair-arm with his fist. "By gosh, there's some things I'm gonna do for myself! Now get that neurosurgeon out of his office and get to work!"

News Flash: FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE, formerly a quarterly, will now be published bi-monthly—six issues per year instead of four!

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They tried to corner the drug market,

but they overlooked one possibility . . .

NOTICE OF INTENT

By PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

THE PLANET hung over the edge of the prairie, magnified by the horizon, red and unwinking.

I've been there, thought Kent.

The thought carried no conviction.

He sank wearily onto a step of the small back porch and leaned his head against the post. He couldn't go in just yet. He had to think—to plan. Had to have an answer to the question of what to do next.

He could hear Jean moving softly about the tiny kitchen. The sound of her feet blended with the small night sounds,

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the grass rustling, the distant croak of the bull-frog by the stream in the northwest pasture. But from the big barn there was no sound. In his mind's eye he could see the cattle, lying on their sides in the straw, great brown eyes pleading for help that was not his to give.

The door opened a crack, shooting a shaft of light across the rough boards to where he sat. Jean peered out, and though her head was only a dark silhouette against the light of the kitchen, her attitude was one of worry and concern.

"I've made coffee," she said.

She stood silently for a minute. "There's nothing you can do for them, then?" she asked at last. Her voice had a purposefully flat and unemotional quality, as though to deny the importance of the question.

"Good God, woman! What do you expect me to do without the drugs I need? I'm no faith healer!" Kent was surprised by the violence of his answer. More surprised yet that he had lashed out so at Jean—Jean, whom he wanted only to cherish and protect.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know that it's not you I'm mad at." He managed a crooked smile as he followed her into the kitchen.

"I know," she answered quickly. "I feel the same way."

The kitchen had a cared-for, well-scrubbed look, but was only sparsely furnished. Their slender capital had gone for pure-bred dairy stock and there had been little left for luxuries such as plastic flooring or kitchen curtains. And now the cattle were dying. . . .

"Do you have any idea what the disease is?" Jean asked, setting the steaming cup of coffee before him.

Kent sighed. "Nothing we're familiar with. Nothing that responds to the usual treatment. I suspect that it's one of our imports. One of those gifts to mankind that we brought back from Mars with us!" His voice was bitter. "The maddening thing is that I know what to do. One shot of Marcillin, and *ping!* It's—well, really, it's a miracle. If you could only have seen the experiments with the hamsters!"

"Marcillin!" Jean said the word lovingly. "Your drug."

Kent shook his head. "Not my drug any more," he sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a little of it now!"

"We might be able—" Jean spoke hesitantly. "We could get a second mortgage maybe. I know Marcillin's expensive, but—"

"Do you know what the current extortion rate is for Marcillin?" he demanded. "We couldn't afford one dose for a human, let alone enough for a whole herd of cows. It would cost more than a new herd—more than the whole farm, probably!"

HE RAISED the coffee to his mouth, and the cup rattled against his teeth. His hand was shaking with futile anger. He tried to remind himself that it was only his business at stake, only his future. How would he feel, he asked himself, if it were Jean who were ill, dying for want of a drug that should be available to everyone? He knew that such things happened every day, every hour, every minute. The drug that he had dreamed would free the earth of its everpresent fear of disease was serving, instead, to enrich the bank accounts of a few!

"I'd go to Kezar labs and steal it if I thought I could get away with it," he said reflectively. In the startled silence, he could hear the electric clock buzzing on the shelf over the stove. He shook his head sadly. "It wouldn't work, though. They guard it more carefully than the U.S. Mint."

She tried a shaky smile. It was undoubtedly meant to be cheerful and reassuring. "We can manage with Rupert. It's a good thing that the what's-it attacks only the cows. As long as—"

"As long as Rupert doesn't get it, too," growled Kent. "I was only guessing when I told you that! I'm no fortune-teller! How do I know what it'll attack?"

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There I go again, he thought, *scolding at Jean because she's the only one around to take it out on.*

"The bull is sick, too," he explained lamely. "He doesn't have it as badly as the cows, but if it follows the same course—well, I doubt if Rupert will win any prizes at the International Fair this year."

"Oh!" Jean's voice was stricken. She rose abruptly and poured herself a cup of coffee, making quite a business of it, rattling the dishes noisily. She kept her head averted. Kent had a horrible suspicion that she was hiding tears.

"Listen!" he said harshly. "This time isn't like the others! This time I really will find a way. We won't lose the farm. I'll find a way—"

She didn't answer.

"I'll see how they're doing," he muttered and stumbled out the door and toward the barn.

The red planet was higher now. He tried to make his mind bridge the space between earth and Mars. *I've been there,* he thought futilely. It was beyond imagining. The human mind seemed a puny thing, after all, scarcely capable of thinking of little distances on earth—say, the two thousand miles to New York City—save in terms of words and numbers. Imagine a distance of millions of miles? Impossible! The best he could do was to translate it into time of travel. Day after endless day of travel. Days when he had become convinced that they weren't going at all, that the ship was suspended there forever, locked on an imaginary line between earth and Mars.

In a way, perhaps, the weary spirit-draining delay had been a good thing. It had prepared him for failure. He had left earth confident that he, Kent Roberts, would change the face of the earth with the flora of Mars, that earth's deserts would flower with useful crops garnered on the desert planet. He must have been plausible in his arguments, too. The government and the Kezar Industries, co-sponsors of that first trip to Mars, had made room for him in the strictly limited accommodations of the space ship.

KENT HAD failed in his purpose, of course. Only the most primitive kinds of plants flourish on Mars. But by the time he had stood on that vast and desolate Martian desert, space had humbled him. He wasn't surprised.

"The first of my failures," Kent thought grimly. "I seem to have a talent for them."

This seemed destined to be another. Klover Kween, the champion milk producer, was dead. Rupert, the farm's largest single asset, was definitely sick. Kent went slowly from stall to stall doing what he could for the others. The beams of the gasoline lantern bobbed before him, lighting the sturdy beams and rafters of the barn that he had built to last through all the years of his life. Poignantly the realization came to him that if he failed this time, the loss would be of more than just his livelihood. This may not have been the future that he had once planned for himself, but he and Jean had made a good thing of it.

There had to be a way to get the Marcillin!

Kent rubbed his hand across his forehead. He tried to think. He couldn't buy it; he couldn't steal it. Could he beg it?

Small chance of that!

He could imagine Dr. Thyler—or for that matter, any of the executive personnel at Kezar Industries—getting such a request. What a laugh that would be! Kent Roberts asking for a gift of Marcillin when they couldn't even trust the crazy fool to handle it their way in the laboratory!

A fly reeled into the path of the gasoline lantern, already dizzy from the insecticides with which the barn was sprayed. Kent swatted at it with unwonted vigor.

Kent's boots scuffed through the loose straw on the floor of the barn. But in imagination he walked again the cold

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dry desert of Mars.

Marcillin! The soft mold of distinctive reddish-gray color had grown in the crevasses that scored the Martian plain. It was one of the few dozen "plants" that he had been able to collect, scraping it carefully from the cold rock, hiding his disappointment over the failure of his dreams for a more abundant earth by pouring his zeal into the collection of specimens. Lichens and molds. Not of much practical use to mankind. Unless. . . .

On a wild hunch he had started testing the anti-biotic properties of the molds he had collected. The first few tests yielded no results. Then he tried the red mold. The first tests, casually done, were followed by others, each done with growing enthusiasm. The stuff was miraculous!

He had tended his specimens lovingly on the long trip home—the longer because of his feverish impatience to get back to the laboratories of earth with his prize. He had protected them from moisture, insulated them from heat—not an easy task in the sunbaked hull of a space ship.

And when at last he had unpacked them from the refrigerated tanks, and with all the facilities of the great Kezar pharmaceutical labs at his disposal, he had run some really rigorous tests. Even Kent, the farmer, smiled now, remembering.

Marcillin, he had called it. Specific against every disease known to earth, plus those unknown others that they soon realized had been unintentional cargo of the space ship on its return flight, and which didn't respond to any of the earth-grown antibiotics.

The honor and the glory had been his—for a time.

Kezar Industries had naturally expected him to work for them. They had sponsored the flight, had they not? The salary and position they offered him were such as to render him willing. But the real attraction was the laboratory. Here was the ideal place to carry on his researches into the propagation of the mold. Already the Martian plagues were raging over the earth. What was needed was a large supply of Marcillin, and soon.

HE DUPLICATED the Martian atmosphere and temperature, with no results. An interesting problem, he had thought, outlining a new series of experiments.

Kent, the farmer, looked at his dying cattle and laughed at Kent, the biologist. He had been so ingenious—had thought that Dr. Thyler didn't understand the importance of the tests when he ordered Kent to another project. He had remonstrated in vain. It had taken him a while to understand that it was to the advantage of Kezar Industries to keep the supply of Marcillin small. There was another space ship on the way to Mars—again co-sponsored by Kezar.

There would be a new supply of the pure Martian mold on the return trip. Reproduce it on earth? Then any two-bit pharmaceutical house could put it on the market! But only Kezar had the know-how when it came to space travel.

Those weren't the reasons that were given him, of course. They were the ones he had figured out for himself, in an agony of bitter disillusionment. People were dying and Kezar Industries planned to limit the cure! Wrathfully he had struck out at them, threatened to take it to court, threatened publicity. Such things couldn't happen in a free country!

He had learned differently. They came to him, the quiet men of the security bureau. The government was interested in Marcillin. It was the answer to bacteriological warfare. In view of the fact that Kezar labs considered him a bad security risk, it might be better if he would resign.

"Resign, hell!" he had exploded. "I quit! I'll break this blasted monopoly if its the last thing I ever do!"

He applied for his old position at the university. But the rumor had preceded

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him. Dr. Kent Roberts was a bad security risk. In view of the many government financed research projects. . . . .

The extent of the conspiracy appalled him. A few weeks before he could have asked for almost any position he desired. Now none was open to him. Neither industrial nor academic laboratories had room for a "bad security risk."

He determined to finance his own research. Then it was that he found that Marcillin would not be sold to him for research purposes.

He and Jean bought the farm. Here, at least, he had freedom of a sort, where he could put his own ideas into practice. Or so it had seemed. Kent sighed and turned off the lantern.

It was lighter now, and only a few stars still shone. There was the red one, red with life-saving mold. He gazed at it with baffled longing.

Can't buy, can't beg, can't steal! Had he anything to trade? His name must still mean something. . . .

With gathering hope, he hurried toward the house. It was an idea, at least.

JEAN WAS sleeping with her head on the kitchen table. "I should have made her go to bed," he told himself reproachfully. He tiptoed past her and into the central hallway, cranked the handle of the old-fashioned wall telephone energetically, and gave the number of the Kezar Pharmaceutical lab from memory. For an interminable minute the phone rang fruitlessly, and he thought that it was too early, that no one would be manning the switchboard yet.

"Kezar Industries," answered a tired voice.

"Dr. Thyler, please."

I'll have to do some smooth talking, thought Kent unhappily. *I've never been much good at smooth talk.*

He drummed his fingers impatiently on the battery box. Now that there seemed to be a shred of hope that he might get the Marcillin, every delay was irksome. What was happening in the barn? Had any more cows died? And how was Rupert?

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Thyler isn't in yet." The man seemed to be stifling a yawn. "I'm just the night-watchman, but I could leave a note. . . ."

Kent hesitated a moment, wondering if he should call Dr. Thyler at his home. To show his anxiety wouldn't put him in the best bargaining position, but on the other hand, even a bushel of Marcillin wouldn't help if he didn't get it soon.

He put through the call.

Dr. Thyler sounded sleepy. The slight irritation in his voice gave way to surprise when Kent gave his name.

"Roberts!" he chirruped. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Kent swallowed hard to keep from saying the words that rushed into his mind, and said with as much cordiality as he could muster, "I have a little problem here on my farm that I thought you might be interested in. My cattle are ill with one of the Martian diseases—"

"Really?" Dr. Thyler sounded vaguely amused. "I can't imagine how that can concern me. Except that I feel for you, Roberts, I really do. Accept my sympathy."

Kent clenched his fist. "It occurred to me that Kezar Industries have done no experiments on Marcillin for veterinary purposes. My herd is fairly well known among cattle breeders. I imagine my name is still well known to the general public, due to the rather extensive publicity after the discovery of Marcillin. I thought that if you would be interested in trying Marcillin on my herd—"

"Really," Thyler interrupted impatiently. "We aren't interested in publicity at this time. As you know, we are having difficulty meeting orders from the medical profession."

Kent fought down the picture of men and women dying for want of the drug that he knew he could produce in quantity if it weren't for fools such as the one to whom he was talking.

"You are looking forward, I suppose,"

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Kent said, "to the day when Marcillin will be more generally available? I thought this might be an opportunity to open an additional market against that day."

Thyler was momentarily silent, and Kent hoped that he was imagining another company sending rockets to Mars. An unlikely possibility in the near future, but one that should be worrisome to Kezar.

"I'm afraid we wouldn't be interested," said Dr. Thyler. "The cost of treating a whole herd would be prohibitive. If you are interested in doing publicity work for Kezar, however, I might be able to offer you an interesting proposition. It would be dependent on your signing a guarantee that you would abide by the company security rules, of course."

"Meaning that you want me to be a party to your conspiracy? No, thanks, Thyler. I might make an honest deal with murderers, but that doesn't mean that I'll join them in their dirty work! So help me, I'll produce Marcillin yet and wreck your scheme. And as for what I think of you—"

KENT slammed the receiver on the hook, aware that there are some messages that the telephone company objects to transmitting.

He was trembling with rage. So they thought that they could buy him!

Jean was standing in the doorway, eyes dark with reproach. "Oh, Kent!" she said. "You didn't have to get angry at him."

"I guess I cooked our goose that time, didn't I?" he agreed ruefully. "After that, I'd be surprised if they'd sell it to me even if I did have the money. Even if I did sign all the stuff they require now."

He started slowly toward the door. "Milking time," he said. "Today, at least—"

He was half-way to the barn when the phone started ringing.

It couldn't be anything of consequence, but . . . .

Jean beckoned from the hall as he burst through the door.

"Good morning, Dr. Roberts," said an unfamiliar voice with executive briskness. "Dr. Thyler tells me that you have proposed an interesting experiment. Am I right in understanding that you will give us permission to use your name in connection with any results we might obtain?"

Jean leaned forward eagerly, trying to hear what was being said. Kent crossed his fingers and held them up for her to see.

"I'll be happy to endorse the use of Marcillin for veterinary purposes," Kent said slowly. "I have great faith in its effectiveness. I believe that its merits deserve considerable publicity. I take it that this is an offer to carry out my proposal? If so, something had better be done soon, because this disease seems to work fast!"

"As you know," the smooth voice continued, "the expense of an extensive treatment such as you propose is rather great. However, we are considering an offer of Marcillin for use on one animal."

"One animal," repeated Kent with sinking heart. Still, if that animal were Rupert, the bull, they might still manage to stay on here at the farm.

"All right," he said. "I want it understood that I won't sign anything beyond the usual intention-of-use papers, however. Nothing more long-term than those applying to the use of this particular dose."

The man laughed lightly. "This isn't an attempt to buy you off, Roberts. I understand that you have made certain threats concerning the propagation of Marcillin. You will understand, then, that in the interests of company security, we may want to search your premises first for the presence of hidden laboratory equipment."

Kent sighed impatiently. "I suppose I should be thanking you," he said. "I'll be happy to abide by your rules in this case. But please hurry! I can't guaran-

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tee to keep these cattle alive much longer."

"Our local representative will be out as soon as we can contact him," assured the voice.

He hung up.

"It's all right?" asked Jean. She was quite literally biting her finger nails.

"I think we can make it," he said, for the first time really believing it himself. "Rupert, at least, will recover. Unless—"

He rushed out to the barn, overcome with suspicion that the bull was already dead. He wasn't.

Kent paced nervously through the barn, noting the generally deteriorated condition of the animals, wishing that the local Kezar representative would hurry.

WHEN he heard the truck approaching he rushed out. The local representative climbed down and extended his hand.

"Harkins is the name," he offered cordially. "Glad to meet you, Dr. Roberts, glad to meet you! Understand you're planning to do some experimenting for the Kezar people. Glad to hear it. Heard a while back that you and them had had a falling out. Don't guess it was very good publicity for us. Guess they're glad to have something to show to them reporters that said some things about it— Well, now, if you'll come to the house, I have some papers for you to sign."

So that's it, thought Kent. *My name is supposed to overcome some unfavorable publicity. That's why they phoned back, even after I insulted Dr. Thyler.*

He signed the notice of intention to use the Marcillin for therapeutic purposes. He signed the affidavit stating that he was not an employee of any drug firm or reseach laboratory (as if they didn't know!). He signed an affidavit stating that he possessed no chemical or biological laboratory equipment. The papers seemed endless. Kent looked out at the barn apprehensively.

"Why don't they just make me sign one promising not to try to propagate this dose instead of all these conditions of sales?" he growled.

Harkins looked shocked. "Couldn't do that," he clucked. "That would be— why, it would be monopolistic!"

So Kent scrawled his signature again and again, hand trembling with his desperate haste.

"Now let's hurry with that stuff," he said. "Please."

"Well, now," the little man said. "They said that you was a special case. Said that I was supposed to search for lab equipment. Said that you had agreed to it." He peered at Kent anxiously as though he were afraid he might refuse.

Kent sighed. "Go ahead," he said bitterly. "Look in the barn. Look through the house. Don't forget to turn over the hay!" It was no use. He shouldn't have expected a miracle. The Marcillin would be too late!

"Why can't you just give the injection yourself?" Kent cried. "Why worry about what I'll do with it?"

The little man picked up the papers and fussily straightened the edges.

"Don't know a thing about giving them," he confessed. "Just sell the stuff to doctors, mostly. Don't know much about farm equipment, either. Maybe you'd best come with me and tell me what it's all for."

So Kent was compelled to trail after Harkins, fuming inwardly at the meticulous precision with which he seemed determined to examine the premises.

"What's this thing?" Harkins asked sharply, pointing an accusing finger at the cream separator. Kent attempted to explain.

"That there centrifugal stuff looks like lab equipment to me," Harkins asserted. "Better help me move it out to the truck."

"But, look!" objected Kent. "This is so foolish! You can watch me give the injection. Let's not waste any more time. You'll know where the Marcillin goes! I'll give you the empty ampoule

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to take back with you."

"Oh, I'll have to take it, anyway," the little man assured him. "They said not to leave no lab equipment, though."

He helped Harkins move the separator to the truck, trying to hurry him, trying to salvage a few minutes from this senseless waste of time.

Finally Harkins was satisfied.

"Where's this here animal you're going to use it on?" he inquired.

Kent knew what they were going to find when they entered the barn, knew with fatalistic certainty as they approached Rupert's stall. The bull lay still and glassy-eyed.

"He's dead," Kent said.

ONE more failure. There went the farm. They would have to salvage what they could from its sale. He and Jean would be lucky if they could clear their debts. . . .

Harkins fidgeted impatiently. "Let's get on with it," he prompted. "Can't spend the whole day here!"

Kent turned to him, not comprehending for the moment. But, of course, it made no difference to Kezar Industries whether it was Rupert or merely one of the herd of cows that Marcillin cured! Dully he looked them over, picked Butter Belle, one of the surviving ones in the scene of general carnage. A good producer, too. Not the best, but good.

He gave the injection with a practiced hand. Harkins watched him, clucking sociably. "Hope you know what a treasure you're using there," he admonished. "Worth its weight in emeralds. Not many as can afford it."

Kent briefly considered breaking the little man's neck. No, it was too late now to do any good. He should have done that when Harkins first came. It would have saved time.

Jean was waiting for him by the kitchen door, hands twisted in her apron, eyes bright with hope.

"No good," he said shortly. He didn't look at her while he explained.

"Well," she said with false cheerfulness, "you can always get another job."

"Sure, sure," he agreed unsteadily. "As a ditch digger. Garbage collector. My opportunities are too numerous to mention!"

"You're just tired," she said sturdily. "Up all night! You go lie down. I'll take care of—which one is it?"

"Butter Belle. Better take her out of the barn. It's easier than moving the others."

He was tired. Tired from sleepless hours, tired from seeing injustice done. He lay down on top of the patterned coverlet, boots and all, and slept.

It must have been late afternoon when he again awakened. He could hear Jean in the kitchen. With a sudden pang of conscience, he remembered that she, too, had been up all night, except for a nap with her head on the kitchen table. With guilty haste he splashed cold tap water on his face, rubbed it briskly with the rough towel, and, reflecting that he could wait to shave, hurried into the kitchen.

Her face looked as though she might have been crying. Or was she just tired? Anyway, she smiled with determined cheerfulness.

He pulled her to him and cradled her head against his shoulder and ran his fingers through her fine brown hair. He felt better. "We'll get along, I guess," he started, then put his hand on her forehead. "Your face is hot!" he said with sudden alarm.

"I do feel a little woozy," she admitted. "These late hours! Or maybe I'm just getting old!"

He sent her to bed. She went readily enough, reminding him first that he hadn't had anything to eat all day. "Eggs in the ice-box, cheese, fix yourself toast. . . ."

He scrambled some eggs, telling himself he was a fool to worry about Jean. She was just tired. He was an alarmist to think immediately of disease. Just because she was hot and tired.

How do we know what these alien germs will attack? his mind prodded

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him. *What makes you think it was a disease just of cattle?*

He laid down his toast half eaten and hurried into the bedroom. The room was stifling. He opened the window. Jean was already asleep under the pile of blankets. Extra blankets. He pulled them away from her face and laid his hand against it. She was burning hot. As he watched her, she shivered. Without opening her eyes, she reached for the blankets, pulled them tightly around her. She continued to shake.

He stood there appalled. It was only flu. It had to be! She was tired, run-down from over-work. . . .

Which would make her more susceptible to Martian germs as well as native ones, his mind said relentessly.

He rushed into the hall to phone the doctor. His hand was shaking as he turned the crank.

THE doctor was maddeningly soothing. "Probably just flu. Keep her down. I'll drop in some time this evening."

Kent put the receiver back on the hook and leaned his head against the wall. And if it weren't flu? He broke into a cold sweat as he realized that he had nothing to bid in the Marcillin market. He had used the last Marcillin he would ever see. He had eaten his cake. For Butter Belle, a pure-bred Guernsey—

Which reminded him that she needed milking.

He couldn't find her at first. Jean had staked her out somewhere. Then he heard a plaintive mooing south of the barn.

Butter Belle was a living recommendation for Marcillin. Marvelous stuff, Marcillin. She flicked her tail pertly and fixed him with a clear mild eye.

He looked back at her resentfully. She had had Marcillin, while Jean—

I won't think about it, he told himself, trying to fill his mind with other things.

I wonder what the Marcillin is doing to the lactic acid bacilli, he thought as he directed the stream of milk into the pail. *Probably the milk won't sour. Maybe spoil instead.*

Wonder if I crawled to Kezar on bended knee, they'd let me have Marcillin?

That was the answer, of course! Maybe they'd still take him back if he signed all their damned papers. He would promise never to think of Marcillin again if he could get it for Jean that way!

He hurried to the house, pausing only to set the milk by the back steps. Fool thing to do, carrying it to the house with him. It would have to be thrown away, of course.

Dr. Thyler would be surprised to get two calls from him in one day— He hesitated, his hand hovering over the phone. If it were just flu— Maybe he should wait for the doctor's diagnosis.

He wandered into the kitchen and paused indecisively. The doctor might not come for hours. He decided to wait just thirty minutes, and if the doctor hadn't come, he would call Kezar. Selling out! But he had seen too vividly today the results of delay.

The minutes ticked by slowly. He looked in the bedroom; Jean seemed the same. He made himself some coffee, then set it on the table and forgot to drink it. Only ten minutes! He went to the back door and opened it to peer down the road in the direction from which the doctor would come.

The milk pail was still sitting there by the back stairs. It seemed as good a time as any to dump it. He stepped out and bent to lift it.

The froth on top of the pail was breaking down in numerous minute explosions. Kent paused momentarily. There was a thin pinkish film floating on the surface where it showed through the foam. He stirred it curiously with his finger-tip. The color disappeared. It might have been just reflected from an iridescent bubble. Under layers of worry that filled his mind, curiosity stirred.

Kent stepped back into the kitchen, picked up his cup, and emptied the cold

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coffee. He rinsed it carefully under the hot water tap. He stepped out and thoughtfully filled the cup with milk from the pail. Returning, he set it on the closed lid of the stove in the warm spot over the pilot light.

He started more coffee over the other burner. Opened the door and looked down the road. Was that the doctor's car approaching? He breathed a sigh of relief and prepared to go and greet him when the car entered the yard. The car swept past. Some neighboring farmer.

Kent stepped back into the room, darkened now by the approach of evening. He switched on the overhead light and tiptoed across the hall to the bedroom. Jean was still sleeping. Her breathing seemed shallow, irregular.

He wandered back to the kitchen and looked anxiously at the clock. A few more minutes to go before he phoned Kezar. He took down a clean cup from the cupboard and went to the stove to pour more coffee, glancing into the cup of milk as he did so.

FOR an endless moment he stared at it, afraid to believe what his eyes were telling him. He was dreaming. He was insane, seeing what he wanted to see, hallucinating a wish—

His heart thudded as he carried the milk over to the light. The surface was studded with tiny islands of familiar reddish-gray color. M a r c i l l i n! He couldn't be mistaken. The particular hue of Marcillin was unmistakable. For that matter, what else could have grown in the milk? The Marcillin would have taken care of any other microorganisms. There must have been a few spores of Marcillin mold in the otherwise pure extract that had been injected into Butter Belle.

With infinite care, he set the cup back on the stove. No need now to listen for the doctor's car. With sudden briskness, Kent charged about the kitchen. Flu or mysterious Martian disease? What did it matter? Here was the cure.

More precious than emeralds, Harkins had said. Fervently Kent echoed the thought. More precious than emeralds to him at this moment.

But tomorrow? Kent laughed aloud. Tomorrow it would be so cheap that even the poorest peasant working in the rice fields of China could use it!

* * * *

"But I thought it grew only in cold places," Jean said when she woke. He tightened his arms around her.

"That was the mistake I made, too," he admitted. "I forgot that the natural habitat isn't necessarily the optimum one."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the mold did the best it could on Mars, barely surviving in an environment that provided those things which it found absolutely essential. Milk apparently provides those same essentials, plus much more ideal conditions of growth. Warmth. Moisture. In other words, if the mold were thinking, he'd probably say, 'Mars was never like this!'"

"Well, was it?" she asked playfully.

He put his finger under her chin and turned her face toward him. One long kiss later he murmured huskily, "What do you think?"

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By R. S. RICHARDSON

4 CENTURIES OF PLANETS

IN CASE you would like to know, on July 13, 1653, at Greenwich midnight, the planet Saturn was exactly 851,565,000 miles from the sun. Or if you prefer to go ahead in time, you might be interested to learn that on December 7, 2060, at the same hour, Jupiter will be distant from the sun by just 476,166,000 miles.

Until recently, several hours would have been required to obtain even an approximate value for the position of a planet so far removed in time. Such calculations, if made accurately, are intricate affairs beset with many pitfalls and unless you are steeped in such work you had better leave it alone. Of course, most astronomers today don't even know how to make the simplest calculations about the planets since their interests lie exclusively in pursuing the elusive electron.

It required eleven minutes by actual count to obtain the information about Saturn and Jupiter cited above. This extraordinary speed was made possible by publication of a book — the type science-fiction fans have been talking about for the last couple of decades. Although this book will never make the best-seller list, we can be reasonably sure it will be remembered long after most of the best-sellers of today are forgotten. The book is Volume XII of the *Astronomical Papers* of the American Ephemeris which is fresh off the press of the government printing office in Washington.*

Except for a brief foreward, the book consists of three hundred pages of the longest and solidest looking figures you ever saw, rows and rows of numbers

*For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D.C. Price $3.50.

A World-Famous Astronomer Looks at Space Flight

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carried out to nine decimal places. But don't be misled. These figures are much more exciting than they look. For they are exactly the kind of figures we *must* have if we are ever going to pilot a space ship to the planets. You have been talking about such tables for a long time.

And now here they are.

The Time and the Space

Briefly, this volume contains the heliocentric rectangular coordinates of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, at intervals of forty days from 1653 to 2060. In other words, if you want to know the precise location of these planets with respect to the sun or to one another you can do so by merely turning a page, something that was impossible before. (Previously, the only similar work in existence was a volume that gave the positions of all the planets up to 1960 to five decimals issued by the British Almanac Office.) According to the preface in Vol. XII, "these coordinates will be useful in discussing the motions of the planets themselves and in computing their effects on comets and other objects." Instead of "other objects" they might just as well have said "rockets and space ships," for there is no essential difference between a space ship coasting between planets and a comet or asteroid. To determine the path of a ship in space it is necessary to know the attractions of the planets upon it. And only from an accurate knowledge of their positions can such information be obtained.

The authors believe that unless some revolutionary improvement occurs in our methods of observation these tables will hold good for more than a hundred years until 2060. By that time many authorities feel confident that space travel will have arrived. So it is quite possible that the present work will be one of the first—if not the first—official government publication to have a direct bearing upon interplanetary travel.

The publication of this volume containing one and one-half million figures is another striking example of the enormously powerful tool we have available in the electronic computer. Indeed, without such a device it is doubtful if space travel could ever become a reality. The extent that such a robot exceeds human activity is shown by the fact that *each step* in the calculations involved 800 multiplications, 100 divisions, 1200 additions and subtractions, 600 transfers, the printing of 3200 digits and the punching of 1900 digits. Imagine trying to do that by pencil and pen the next time you are trying to balance your bank account. Yet the machine could do it all in two minutes.

We can't say how many steps were needed but there must have been plenty. In all, more than five million multiplications and divisions and seven million additions and subtractions of large numbers were performed by the machine. And the problem was of such a nature that a single error would have rendered the entire calculation useless!

Guarding Against Error

To guard against possible failure of the numerical operations some of the work was done by hand and compared with the values turned out by the machine. Five women were given credit for this part of the work. When it comes to mathematics women have held their own with men ever since Madame Lepaute helped Clairaut and Lalande predict the return of Halley's comet back in 1759.

It should be emphasized that the positions of the planets given in these tables do not depend upon any theory regarding their motions beyond Newton's law of gravitation. That is, the work is started with positions of planets obtained directly from actual observations. From these observed positions the velocities and forces and all the other quantities can be computed. Once you get

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started, you can go either backward or forward by a process called numerical integration, which is a kind of arithmetical system of raising yourself by your bootstraps.

It is fairly easy to do but it is exceedingly tedious.

The Sky's the Limit

One reason for undertaking a direct numerical approach to the problem was the fact that the planets were straying badly from their predicted positions. For example, Hill's tables of Saturn had gotten so far out of step with that planet that they were good only to five figures and soon would not have sufficed for the most ordinary applications. Similarly, Jupiter, Uranus, and Neptune, were all departing from their predicted positions by large amounts. Hill was one of the greatest theoretical astronomers the United States has produced, but even he was unable to formulate a theory of the motions of the heavenly bodies that would hold good for more than a few years in advance.

Incidentally, the *American Ephemeris* used a value for the mass of Pluto that is about 90 per cent of the best value obtained from the perturbations of Uranus and Neptune. There is something very peculiar about Pluto which is not understood as yet. If we use the best values derived for the mass and diameter of Pluto then the planet comes out with a density of 55, which seems impossibly high.

It was suggested some fifteen years ago by an English astronomer, A.C.D. Crommelin, that the diameter of Pluto appears too small due to specular or mirror-like reflections from its surface. Recent experiments on balls coated with various substances support this idea. Thus it was found that a ball with a brightly polished surface or one coated with aluminum paint appeared much smaller than those with a mat or mottled surface.

The experimenters concluded that Pluto may be covered with mirror-like frozen pools which were formed from its former atmosphere.

The publication does not give the positions of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Moon, and Mars, which are the ones most needed from the standpoint of space travel. The reason is that these planets are so small and close to the sun that their attractions on a comet are of scant importance when compared with Jupiter and Saturn. In fact, the terrestrial planets are so insignificant that they can generally be included simply by lumping them in as part of the sun. When a comet like Halley's gets past Jupiter it is moving so fast that a planet the size of the Earth cannot affect it much unless there is a very close approach, say within less than five million miles.

But these are minor matters. Coordinates for the inner planets can be prepared when they are needed by the same methods already used for the giant planets and Pluto. So far as space travel is concerned the navigational part of the problem would appear to be completely solved.

Featured in Next Month's Issue

★

THE STAR DICE

A Castaway Returns to Earth to Find a Different World than the One He Left

A Galactic Novel

By ROGER DEE

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Emilish knew that Man had conquered Space—

he was to find that Man had lost the Earth!

GRAVESONG

By WALTER MILLER, JR.

FOR five subjective centuries she had lived, although Earth had aged half a million years since she had left it. She remembered Earth, now that she was dying on the parched yellow soil of Sorcerer VI. She remembered, and complained like an old hag of her fate, and the fate of her race. Her voice was a thin whine, and her face was cracked and haggard by the ages as she pleaded with him.

"Take me back, Emilesh—to Earth!"

"Yes, Motar," purred the young man who knelt beside her pallet.

"Not here—don't bury me here."

"No, Motar."

She wheezed weakly and stared beyond the window-slit toward the blue-green sky where blazed the Sorcerer and Sorcerer's wife—twin suns, pale yellow giant and blue-white dwarf, devouring one another in a close orbital embrace.

"Man is no longer Man," complained the old woman.

"I don't understand," murmured her son.

She stared at him with dull violet eyes, faded by the years. "How old are you, Emilesh?"

He made a choking sound in his throat. She was fading fast, becoming delirious perhaps.

"I am only fifty, Motar."

"You do not remember Earth."

"No. But I remember Viking II, and you said—"

"It is *not* like Earth. There is but one Earth! Made for Man. And Man made it Earth, but he is gone."

"Not gone, Motar. He has won space."

She hissed a low sigh and closed her eyes. "You cannot understand."

"Tell me, Motar." He leaned forward to blot a fleck of pink foam from her cracked lips.

"Give into the hands of one man great power—and men become slaves."

"It is true."

"Give all men great power—and *Man* becomes a slave."

"I do not understand."

She raised herself up on a quaking arm and stared at him with wild eyes. Her voice crept a note higher.

"But give *each* man, every man, great power—and Man passes away. He dies, do you understand?"

"No, Motar."

She crumpled back on the pillow and closed her eyes. "What is society, Emilesh?"

He paused, bewildered. "There is the Liberty Drive Society on Todmacht V. And the Funph Corporation that owns Darkon VII and manufacturers energy-triggers for the five-space drive. And—"

"No, Emilesh—*your* society. Where is *your* society?"

He straightened his shoulders proudly and smiled. "I am owned by no corporation, Motar! You know that! I am free lance."

She turned her face to the wall.

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A head reared up out of the morass

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"Where is your law?"

"Law—*law*? I—"

"You have forgotten the word."

"Perhaps, Motar—I—"

Her breathing became louder, faster. "Take me to Earth, Emilesh."

"I shall."

"Scatter my ashes there—where Man—still—"

HER voice trailed off. He sat staring at her for a long time. Then he arose and went out to stand in the yellow dust and watch the setting of Sorcerer and Sorcerer's wife. The sky went orange and gray, and at last the ten thousand suns of Cluster Regenesis winked out to gleam like the eyes of dorquebirds, squatting in their nests of planets. And beyond the stars of the cluster, the nebulous band of the Milky Way streaked the blackness, its glowing belt splotched and blotted by the Great Rift. Beyond the galactic nucleus, beyond the dust screens of the Rift, far out in an arm of the galactic spiral, lay Sol—class G star, magnitude 4.8, main sequence—invisible, insignificant.

At midnight, the smoke of a funeral pyre darkened the stars. Before dawn, he burned the house, as a place of death. And there was no one but Emilesh to watch it crumble in ashes on that seabound continent of Sorcerer VI. Then he went to the ship.

He went alone with Motar's ashes, for he had not yet captured himself a wife, and he would not trade his freedom as free lance for any woman offered as enticement by the corporate societies. He preferred to live alone as wanderer, exploiter, trader—until he happened upon the camp of an equally lonely female.

It was a hard thing Motar had asked of him, hard because it would cost him five years of aging in hypnohibernosis while the time-lag would drink up several hundred centuries of galactic local time. He would return to a different era, but that mattered little. They had done it several times during Motar's subjective lifetime.

He placed the ashes in a sealed vault and strapped himself in the recline-seat. A microphone lowered itself before his face.

"Sybern Seven, answer please."

"I am hearing," grated the metallic voice.

"Have you a star in your memory called Sol?"

"Pause for scanning."

There was a silence in the small ship. Then—

"Negative. It is perhaps listed by sector designation?"

The suggestion was followed by a click and a sliding sound. A thick volume appeared at his elbow. He shuffled the pages, then read aloud: "It has been renamed. *Oculus Christi Regis*, 10,400 parsecs, 1.51 radians. It is our destination, Sybern Seven."

"Please designate planet," croaked the robot.

Emilesh paused. "I believe it is the fourth—no, the third. Chose a temperate land-mass for landing. Now prepare me for hypno-hybernosis."

The couch was moist beneath him. A mist arose about him, collected on his skin, congealed to form a warm oily membrane. He closed his eyes. Steel fingers encircled his wrists. A needle touched the hollow of his arm, probed deep into a vein. He felt lighter. Another touched his chest. A jab of pain caused him to yelp. And then the needle glided gently between ribs. His pulse began to lag, his breathing slowed. A blinding point of light danced in his waning consciousness. Somewhere—far away—the thunder of rockets.

"It is still and silent in the womb," droned a voice. *"It is warm and black in the womb. Still and silent. Warm and black. Very heavy."*

Emilesh slept.

THERE was silence; darkness and silence. A breath of fresh night air reached his nostrils, cool and pleasant about his face. He lifted his head. Faint

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moonlight was splashing through the open airlock. He heard the quiet chirp of insects and the distant howl of an animal.

"Where are we?" he groaned weakly.

"Oculus Christi Regis III. Am I permitted to retire from consciousness?"

"Retire."

He unbuckled himself and sat for a long time working his joints. The electro-stimulators had been at work on him while he slept, but they were no substitute for active exercise. He was weak and sick and a dull ache pervaded his bones.

He arose and staggered to the airlock. In the night wind, some of the sickness passed. He stared about at the moonswept landscape.

Earth! Earth after six- hundred thousand years.

Sybern had landed at the edge of a grove atop a flat hill. At the foot of the slope flowed a narrow river, clothed along its length in bunches of black trees through which reflected moonlight peeped.

He left Motar's ashes in their vault and slid down to stand on the rocky ground. Earth! He could feel it, a sense of rightness, of belonging here. The way the wind came, and its smell, and the rustle of the trees in the grove. They stirred memories, and he tried to think, but there were no memories.

"I have never been here," he reminded himself.

Born in space, grown to manhood in the heart of the galaxy, memories of Earth were impossible to him. But the feeling of memory was there, and he wondered over it. He stooped and gathered up a handful of the hard soil—grass-roots, and moist sand, and broken bits of soft rock. He squeezed it in his fist, and it felt *right*. Strange! Did the feeling of memory spring out of the depths of a race-mind, arise out of the sub-structure of a forest-bred species?

He crumbled the earth in his fist and thought, "I am made of this stuff."

Then he walked to a place where the slope steepened, and looked out beyond the river, across billowing grassland into gray distance, dimmed by moonlit mist. There were no lights. Emilesh, whose beginnings lay beyond the Great Rift, had somehow known that there would be no lights on Earth.

He looked upward to the thinly scattered stars, Man's lights, sprinkled across the galaxy like flaming chaff in the wind. Who had stood on the hill before him in ages past—and longed for the stars? Who had dreamed here?

The visitor smiled faintly, drinking in his oneness with the soil, with the wind and its odor of Autumn. He wondered if the dreamer had understood the thing he wanted, and the thing he intended giving up. Flesh, torn from the planet of its birth, found freedom in space; freedom but not contentment. He shivered.

It was dangerous to stand here. He must not linger. Earth was cast in the image of Man. If he stayed too long, he might never escape her. He turned quickly back toward the ship, and stopped.

A slender white figure stood by the airlock in the moonlight. A *human* figure! He groped for his holster, but it was inside the ship. He stood staring dumbly at the motionless figure of a woman, unclad and silent as the earth.

HE WALKED slowly toward her, his boot-heels crunching in the ground. He stopped a few feet away. She had not moved, only watched him. Her hair was close-cropped, and black as the night. Her face was an oval shadow with a spot of brightness on the tip of her nose. She was well-formed, with soft white limbs and a high bosom that longed for children. She tossed her head a little, and he could see that she was smiling at him. But her eyes caught a flash of the moon, and they gleamed for a moment like cat's eyes.

The thought came like a whisper, but it was soundless.

"I am Eva. Have you come to bury

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your dead, Wanderer?"

For an instant he felt his scalp crawling. He had met telepathic races, but never a human so endowed. But then he remembered. Hundreds of thousands of years had passed by the Earth-clock, time for evolution to be at work. A telepath—and he had hardly expected to find any remnants of humanity.

"Give me your dead, Wanderer," purred the thought. "And I shall tend the grave."

He gasped a little, and leaped to a conclusion: *others had returned before him—bringing the remains of their ancestors to rest in the soil of Oculus Christi Regis III.*

"Tending graves, is it your duty?" he muttered.

She stepped back, as if frightened by the sound. She moistened her lips and nodded, but her eyes were gleaming curiously again. He knew then that she did not understand his speech, but only the thought that accompanied it. A telepath—she—had—forgotten—how to speak. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"What do you ask in barter? In exchange for allowing me to scatter my motar's ashes here?"

By her answering jumble of thought, he knew she failed to understand. Still, if her duty was that of grave-tender, he could only conclude that some corporate enterprise had seized Earth as a burial ground. "Give me your dead," was her only intelligible reaction.

Emilesh shook his head. His scalp was tingling again. The thought had seemed so eager. He pushed his way past her and entered the airlock. A few minutes later he returned with the urn, and she was still standing there. She saw it, and opened her hands as if to take it.

"No!"

The girl backed away, stared at him somberly. Then her pale marble shoulders lifted in a faint shrug.

"I'm sorry I spoke sharply. I—"

She turned away slowly and began walking toward the blackness of the grove, her body swaying gracefully in the moonlight. She was beautifully formed, and Emilesh realized suddenly what he had done. After many years of searching free lance planets for a mate. . . .

"Wait!"

The girl walked gracefully on. He started after her, then glanced down at the urn in his arms. There would be time to find her later. He had come to bring Motar home.

He walked through thickening brush down the slope to the bank of the river, and the ground became soft and wet beneath his feet. Far out in the silvery water a fish leaped high and splashed again. He held the urn high in the wind, let it tilt, and slowly spill a stream of dust that whipped away and became invisible in the lustrous gloom.

"Break the urn," whispered a voice in his mind, and he knew the girl was watching from the hilltop.

He shattered it over his knee, and the pieces that remained in his hands he threw out into the river. Motar had returned to Earth. A dust, the substance of whose longing was so great that it demanded passage across ten thousand parsecs to be united with the dust of Earth again.

HE TURNED away and climbed the slope, pausing twice to rest, for the long endurance of hypnohibernosis had weakened him. He dare not leave again until his strength returned—weeks perhaps.

Back at the ship, he called to the girl, but she did not answer. He tried calling with his mind alone, but there was no answering thought. She had been watching him when he was at the river's edge. She could not be far. He walked toward the grove, seeking her, his mind toying with the thought of taking her as mate. . . . if she would go with him, or at least if she did not object too violently to being captured.

The rustling trees closed over him,

(Please turn to page 114)

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and only slender shafts of moonlight penetrated the foliage. The undergrowth was sparse; man had trained his planet well.

"Eva—"

No answer. The woods were full of tiny sounds, twitterings and scamperings in the brush. He paused to peer about him.

Then he saw the eyes, glowing softly by a treetrunk. He stepped quickly toward them.

"Eva—"

AhhrrRRRAAUGHrr!

A thundering roar split the night. He stumbled and lurched back. The eyes belonged to a giant cat. He clawed for the missing weapon, then darted for a treetrunk. But he paused. The animal was doing nothing. Suddenly the eyes disappeared, and he heard the creature lumbering away through the brush. It had not molested him. *Why?*

"You are Man," came the girl's thought.

He leaned against the tree, panting slightly while he recovered his composure. A thrill shot through him. He had walked on many planets, fled from many beasts, and killed a few. But never had he met a giant carnivore who would turn and walk away from the pale and hated biped.

"He hates you," called the whisperer, *"but he knows you for who you are."*

He shook his head in wonder. Even the beasts remembered.

"Where are you?" he called to the girl. "Come. Let us talk."

Her answer was slow in coming. Had she heard his thoughts about a mate?

"It is best that you go quickly from this world, Space-animal."

The name shocked him. She had called him "Man" before.

"You—are—*human*, still?" he muttered suspiciously.

"We are both of Man. But we are different."

"The same species—"

"No."

"The same flesh—"

"Yes—" But her thought was like bitter laughter.

"Come out."

For a long time he stood waiting. But she neither came nor answered him. He sighed and turned away, walked slowly back through the woods and across the narrow clearing to the ship.

THE singing of birds awoke him. The Earth was full of bright yellow sunshine. A large blue insect buzzed in through the air-lock, wheeled in a crazy circle and buzzed out again. Emilesh sat up and shook the sleep from his head. He felt fine, refreshed. He was still weak from hypno, but never had he felt such rapid recovery. The air of Earth, mother of his race, was sweet medicine indeed. He groped sleepily for his clothing, then pushed it aside. It was too warm for anything more than a short kilt.

A bundle lay in the airlock—a bundle wrapped in leaves. He frowned in bewilderment, then went to stoop over it. The fragrant odor of fresh-cooked meat. He stripped away the leaves and found the roasted carcass of a small mammal. Still puzzled, he glanced up toward the grove.

Whispering laughter floated through his mind. The girl. He thought a grateful exclamation at her and tore off a succulent hindquarter.

"Come join me," he offered.

There was a long pause. Then her graceful white figure slipped out of the trees and came toward him with the swaying catlike walk. He stopped eating to stare. She was perfect—a narrow doll-like face with upturned features and hazel eyes. He was uncomfortably aware of her body, and he kept his eyes averted lest he think some thought to embarrass her.

He offered her some of the meat she had brought him, but her dark head shook in quick refusal.

"I do not eat of the dead."

He dropped the hind-quarter quickly and stared at her. The tingling in his

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scalp again.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She thought an image at him—a small brown animal with a short fluffy tail and long ears. The image was nibbling a grass-blade.

"Only an animal," he grunted, recovering.

"It is forbidden for the grave-tenders to eat of the dead."

A sanctity rule of the corporate society, he thought to himself. She seemed to catch the thought, but made no reply—only watched him curiously as he ate.

"You are different," she thought at last.

Emilesh looked up quickly. She had told him that before, but now he detected a certain qualitative note in the assertation—a note that tended to point out where she thought the difference lay.

"You have never seen a male!" he gasped.

The loudness of his voice frightened her and she inched away. The words meant nothing to her, but the mental images that accompanied them seemed to disturb her deeply.

Then suddenly she thought a timid question at him, and he gasped. It was little short of obscene! The girl caught his reaction. She leaped nimbly to her feet and darted away toward the forest.

"Eva, wait!"

But she was gone. He cursed himself for a moment. It was not obscene, but only the bluntness of complete ignorance. He called after her and tried to explain, but she had hidden in an embarrassed silence.

THREE days passed. He saw nothing more of her, but at times he felt that his thoughts were being examined and studied from afar.

Nor did he see any other human beings. The broad flat plain beyond the river was an expanse of grassy emptiness. When the wind whipped the grass, tiny white stones sometimes peeped into view. They were rectangular and set vertically in the ground. Markers of some kind he guessed—but there were so many of them, spaced two or three paces apart. And the grass seemed to grow higher in low mounds at the foot of each marker. They stretched beyond the range of his vision, and whatever their purpose, he guessed that the plain was completely covered with them.

He was walking far down along the river bank when he heard the girl call to him again. He had been gone perhaps an hour, and the ship lay far beyond him. He came to a mud flat that reached from the riverbank back to a low place in the forest, where apparently a brook emerged during the rainy season. The mud flat was only a stone's throw wide, and there were rocks set here and there in the ooze, so that it would be possible to cross by skipping from one to the next. He had just stepped on the first stone when the girl's thought struck him.

"No! Stay away! Do not cross!"

He turned to frown irritably toward the grove. She had been avoiding him for nearly a week, never answering when he called. He snorted and leaped to the next stone. It seemed to sink a little with his weight.

"No! Man-creature! There is danger!"

He paused to look around. There was nothing but the ooze of black stuff, steaming in the sun. The river to his right, and the forest to his left. He moved to make another leap. But the stone seemed to quake a little under his feet, and something touched his boot as if feeling of its texture.

Emilesh looked down. *A hand*—a fumbling *hand!* Covered with the sticky mud, it reached up out of the mire to fumble, and then to clutch at his ankle. He shrieked and kicked at it. Another appeared to grasp for a hold. He screamed and leaped for the bank, sprawling in the wet sand and clawing his way up the slope on hands and knees.

When he reached dry grass, he looked back. A head had reared itself up out of

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the morass. White eyes and gaping paws. It sucked in a loud breath and submerged itself again.

His flesh was crawling as he trotted back toward the safety of the ship. The thing in the mud was the flesh of man, tortured by six thousand centuries. Why not?—he thought—trying to console himself. Species evolved by splitting. The thing in the mud had taken the low road. Some form of adaptation to a threat that had long since vanished.

And the girl in the woods? The high-road?.

"It is you, *Emilesh, who have taken the road to the stars."*

"Come show yourself!" he growled angrily.

But she was already sitting in the air-lock of his ship, eyeing him with somber concern. "It is best that you go back."

IT WAS a moment before he realized she had whispered the words in accompaniment to her thought. And the words were *real* words, not mere sequences of thought images that suggested them. She had learned to speak, perhaps by probing his mind.

"You are pleased?"

He nodded and grinned at her.

"Will you go?"

He sat down in the sun and chewed a blade of grass. "I am still not fully recovered," he lied.

She shifted her body in the entrance-way and crossed her long white legs. "You are wondering if I will go with you," she murmured wistfully.

He reddened. "Will you?"

"No. I am of Earth."

"So am I."

"We are different."

"How?"

She groped for words, and he felt the confusion in her mind. She stared at him for a time. "Your hair is yellow," she said.

Emilesh caught a fleeting impression that she only half understood the concept of "human", that in her mind "to be human" was to be exactly like herself, modified by the recent discoveries she had made concerning his sex.

"Tell me," he said gently, "when is the last time you saw a human being?"

She stared out across the grasslands. "I don't remember," she murmured. "Maybe never."

"Where were you born?"

"I don't know."

A suspicion that had been gnawing at his mind crept into consciousness again. He tried to suppress it, but the girl looked at him sharply.

"You're thinking perhaps I was *never born*. You're thinking I was—*made*."

"Are you an android?" he breathed.

"I don't know."

"How long have you lived?"

She shook her head slowly. She didn't know.

"Do you remember being a child?"

Her shudder was a visible thing. Her face drained of color, and an impenetrable wall closed about her mind. But in an instant before the curtain dropped, he caught a glimpse. She had been a child, long ago. And she refused to remember the horror of it.

"Why do you torment me so?" She was gazing at him evenly, but with reproof in the cool green eyes.

Emilesh crossed to her quickly and caught her cool shoulders in his hands. "Come with me, Eva."

"No. I am of Earth." She cast her eyes skyward, as if afraid. "You are an animal out of space. I am an animal of the ground."

But he saw that if he decided to take her, she would not resist. Still he wondered. Why had some men lingered on the planet after the Liberty Drive? But of course, some would always linger, clinging ever more tightly to the Earth as each succeeding generation drained away those who were willing to go. And soon there would be only those who were incapable of leaving.

Like the creatures who lived in the mud. . . .

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She caught the thought. She stood up and walked away from him. Down the slope toward the river.

"Eva, where are you going?"

No answer. She walked on with lazy catlike grace until she came to the bank. He watched with a puzzled frown. Suddenly she dived into the water, and he started a few steps after her. But she surfaced quickly and began swimming toward the opposite bank.

"Eva, wait!"

She climbed out on the opposite bank and disappeared into the brush. He called after again, but it was no use. He turned toward the ship.

SUDDENLY the image struck him, and he closed his eyes. She was thinking of the mud-flat. Of a group of gibbering, writhing bodies milling toward the bank, bearing a screaming child. The child was human, but streaked with the smelly ooze of the flat. The mud-creatures threw the child out bodily onto the bank. It whimpered and crawled back in the mud, pleading with them and wailing. They cast it forth again and again, until bruised and crying softly, it crawled away through the high grass toward the forest. He felt some of its pain—desperation at being unwanted. . .

By its parents!

Because it was different!

He sat down in a sick heap. She was a child of the mud-beings—a throwback across half-a-million years.

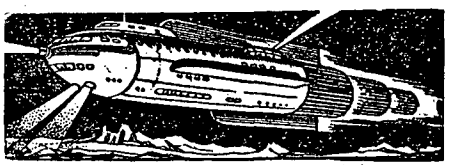
"I am sorry, Emilesh. I wanted to go with you."

Glumly he climbed in through the airlock and began making preparations for his departure. She was right. She was of the soil, he of space. And he remembered Motar's words—about the package-sized Liberty Drive: *Give each man, every man, great power—and Man will pass away.*

By freedom unlimited.

He caught another glimpse of her before he blasted off from the hillside on *Oculus Christi Regis III*. She was a tiny doll-like figure across the river in the field of high grass. She was bending over, working among the white marble markers. He caught a thread of her thought, and understood what she was doing. She was digging a grave. Her own. She liked working in the earth.

"Destination: Sorcerer VI," growled the space-animal.



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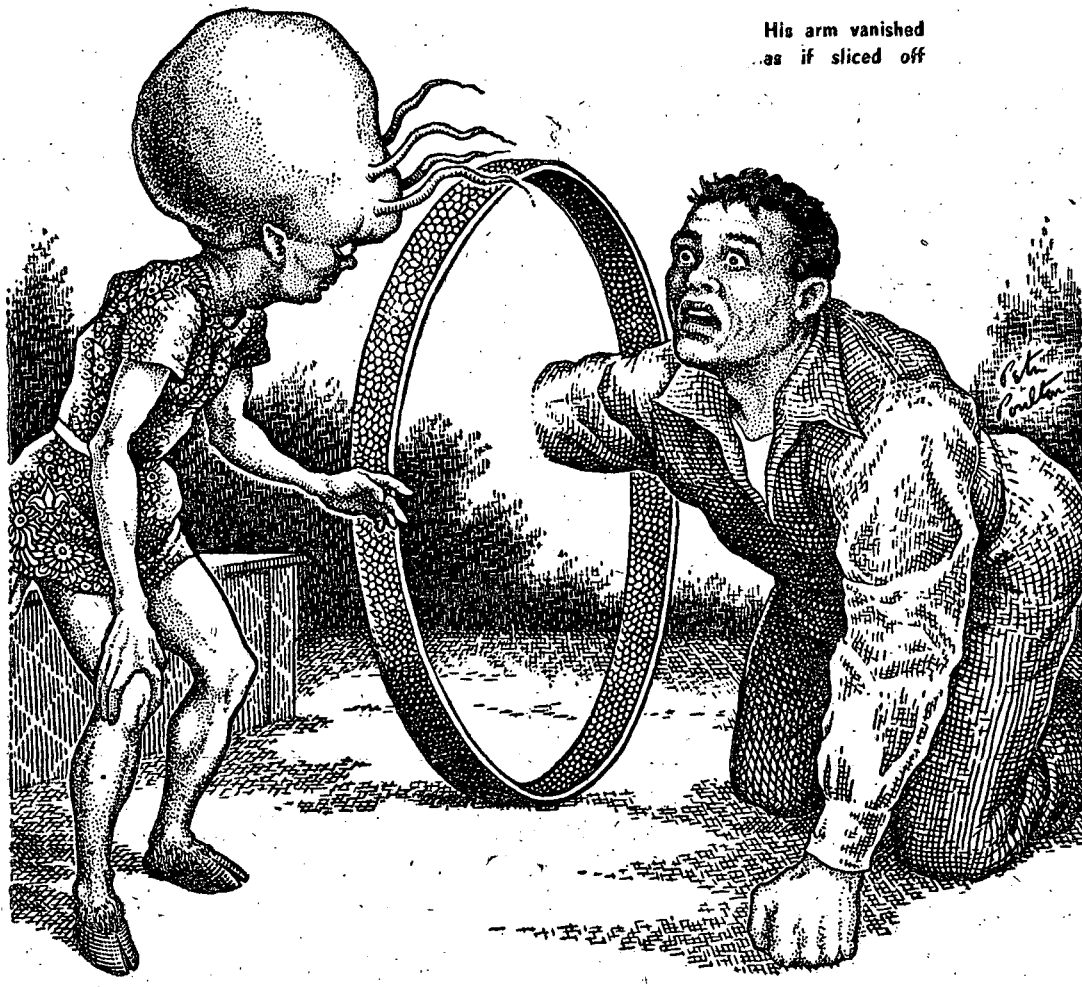

DISPOSAL

By STANLEY WHITESIDE

CLIPPER was just hoisting his third glass of glubor when lean fingers timidly plucked his sleeve. His bloodshot eyes swiveled to meet the humble gaze of the little Venusian, then he jerked the sleeve free.

"Beat it," he suggested from the interior of his glass.

Ezzo Karpo, in whose scrawny veins flowed the blood of three planets and untold races, smiled placatingly.

"McNulty would not buy my inven-

Clipper's magic space-consumers gave instant transit to anything he wanted . . . and some things he didn't

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tion." His wizened face was sad and the stubby feelers above his ears were drooping.

"What? Oh!" Clipper shrugged his fat shoulders. "Hey," he called to the bartender. "Give Ezzo a drink."

As he slapped a coin on the stained plastic he leered at the two other customers who got up muttering and walked out. Few men could stomach a Venusian—or even a half-Venusian like Ezzo, who was now gulping his drink.

The two huge eyes above the rim of the glass rested worshipfully on Clipper. "I will sell my invention to you," Ezzo informed the big man.

"Oh no you don't," Clipper growled. "Just because I buy you a meal once in a while."

He eased his bulk off the seat and waddled toward the door. The back view was as unprepossessing as the front, his ragged overalls stained and popping at the seams.

"Wait!" Ezzo squeezed through the entrance with him. "Let me show you, no?"

"No." Clipper puffed as he speeded his rolling gait. "Go talk to someone else."

"But you are my friend." Ezzo's squeaky voice quivered. "I—"

"Friend! Clipper's fat face purpled. "Why, you—"

"And I want to make you rich!"

Clipper slowed up and hiccoughed thoughtfully. "How?"

"I can show you at my house," Ezzo pleaded.

Clipper stuck a toothpick between his fat lips, twisting the thoughtful scowl on his smudgy face. It was a greedy and cunning face, yet there was an underlying good humor, even kindliness, under the whiskery outlines, though few would give him credit for this.

Clipper flew an odorous freighter of jet vintage, called the *Daphne,* and he delivered cargoes for half the regular transfer prices. Of course, the owners of valuable freight found it wise to seal the crates solidly and count their change carefully when paying him.

But then, perhaps only such a man could have recognised in Ezzo Karpo a hungry little being who might need a meal or a slap on the back once in a while. Ordinary people wouldn't touch Ezzo with a pole, much less enter his house. Earthmen just didn't visit the Venus native-quarters, not even for slumming. It wasn't healthy in East Olympus.

Still, Clipper was never fussy. It was known that custom and appearances never bothered him, and it was even hinted.

"All right," Clipper rumbled grudgingly. "Make it snappy!"

Gratefully Ezzo led the way.

OF ALL Earthmen only this one spoke kindly to him. Perhaps Ezzo provided something that even Clipper could look down on, thus filling a psychological need in the fat man.

Yet, despite the haphazard anatomy of hoofs, feelers, hands, and—it was rumored—rudimentary wings and tail, Ezzo had a brain. But for his hodge-podge origin he could have been lecturing in a top university. As it was he slunk down alleys and begged for crumbs. And even Clipper's stubby nose wrinkled as they entered what Ezzo called his home.

"Let's see what you got," the fat man grumbled.

"Observe this!" From a closet Ezzo brought a ring of bright metal, about the size of a bicycle wheel. He balanced it upright on the floor.

"May I have your hat now?"

Clipper passed his greasy cap. With a ceremonious gesture Ezzo tossed it through the ring—at least that's what he appeared to do.

"Hey!" Clipper stared. The cap had certainly gone toward the ring, had obviously entered the circle. But it never came out the other side.

"Hey!" Clipper repeated indignantly. His fat hand groped around the metal. He reached through the ring. "Yow!" His arm disappeared as if neatly sliced off!

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Hurriedly he jerked it back. It reappeared all right, though with a nervous tingle. "Tricks," he rumbled angrily. "Gimme my hat, you twerp."

Hastily Ezzo skittered back to the closet. From inside he retrieved the cap, also a second ring exactly like the first. While Clipper indignantly dusted his headgear Ezzo balanced the second ring a few feet from the first.

"Now behold," he said proudly.

This time he used his own hat, a two-holer styled for his feelers. It sailed neatly through the first ring, disappeared; then it popped out the other ring.

Clipper rasped his chin. "Do it again!"

This time Ezzo moved one ring into the littered kitchen and, when he tossed his hat, Clipper lumbered for the kitchen door. Sure enough, the hat suddenly appeared, from nowhere, somewhere inside the ring. It rolled under the sink.

Clipper scooped it up with a grunt and threw it back in the ring. He reached the other room just in time to see Ezzo pick it up as it rolled from ring number one.

"All right. All right." Clipper grabbed Ezzo's boneless arm. "How does it work?"

"It's mine—it's Ezzo's Alloy." Ezzo's arm thinned out like an angle worm and he slid free. "It excludes space." He rattled off a series of mental calisthenics involving three simultaneous levels of differential. "You see?"

"Yeah," Clipper said heavily. "But how does it work?"

"It's indivisible. You can't bisect Ezzo's Alloy. Even if you cut it there's nothing between the pieces, not even space."

"Come again?"

"First I cast one ring," Ezzo said. "Then I split it with a duril saw, making two rings of the same piece."

"Well, there's plenty of space between the two now." Clipper eyed the kitchen door, which had creaked shut to hide the other ring.

"That's just it." Ezzo hopped excitedly, his hoofs clacking on the floor. "In reality there's no space between them. Anything between the two rings is only apparently between them. In the mathematics of multidimensional space I can prove that the two are still united."

"I can see that there door is shut between them!"

"It's only because your senses are depending on preconditioned afferent impulses," Ezzo shrilled. "It's not so."

"By damn!" Clipper waddled to the door and kicked it. It was solid, despite Ezzo's nasty crack about his senses. "Look." The fat man half shut his eyes. "I could put something in one ring and it'd always come out the other? No matter what's between?"

Ezzo nodded vehemently, his feelers quivering.

"I'll buy it. How much you want?"

Ezzo looked hopeless. "Ten thousand quintas." His pathetic eyes were mournful. his feelers vibrated anxiously.

Clipper cocked an eye at Ezzo. Then he smiled. "Tell you what," he said frankly, "I ain't got no money, but I know a way to get plenty with them rings." He sounded certain, and his pale eyes were earnest. "S'pose we become partners?"

Ezzo looked dubious.

"You can trust me," Clipper coaxed fatly.

Ezzo's sigh was forlorn. "I can't trust anyone else," he admitted sadly.

IAN McNULTY drove past the concrete landing strips that stretched between the huge storage tanks and warehouses. He sniffed as he spun over a flower-bordered driveway, then slowed to park his car beside the administration building of Olympus Spaceport.

The attendant at the door watched his lean figure briskly mount the steps two at a time.

"The old goat," he muttered biliously. Then he smiled and held open the massive door. "Good morning, Mr. McNulty."

McNulty stalked into the cool building without answering. He crossed the spotless floor, past the bustling clerks and on

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to the blond receptionist, over whose desk he obtruded his sparse and jutting beard.

"Good morning, Mr. McNulty." Pearls adorned her smile, and honey her voice.

"Ay." His tone was a grudging tribute to her looks. "Now I'll be seeing Mr. Car-Bundy."

"Why, go right on in," she said. Her manicured finger pressed a button, alerting her boss with three quick rings.

The administrator appeared very busy at his immaculate desk when McNulty strode in. He was chubby and blond, with pale blue eyes. His natty whites were as spotless as his pinkly scrubbed features.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. McNulty," he exclaimed smoothly. He laid down his pen and offered a scented cigarette. "What can I do for you?"

"Came to see about a ship to pick up my phrenite." Ian McNulty sat down, accepting the cigarette with suspicion. "Clipper quit me."

"Clipper!" Gerald Car-Bundy smiled. "Never reliable. We're busy, but it can be done. You know our motto—We Deliver!"

"Ay—C.O.D." McNulty sniffed the cigarette, then put it gingerly on the desk.

Although Car-Bundy was efficient as a combined adding machine and vacuum cleaner, he was just a mite anxious to turn an extra penny. Still, he never bungled shipments—and McNulty was mining phrenite, dangerous stuff.

Up till now Clipper's scow ship had hauled the ore from the mine to Olympus Spaceport, and Car-Bundy had shipped it to Earth in the interplanetary freighters—at a cost which seared McNulty's frugal soul.

Now Clipper had quit!

"Ye can load my ore direct on your ships," the old man suggested.

"Sorry. Too risky. You know what would happen if one of our freighters touched off a pile of phrenite!"

McNulty grunted, well aware of the risk.

Phrenite remained inactive in the wet swamps of Venus, but once dry it would fire with terrific, spontaneous heat. In fact, it was the hottest fuel known, other than the atomic blast. Therein lay its value as a welding agent for assembling space ships, in gluing together the duril plates. But it had to be kept cool and wet, and shipped in tanks.

Car-Bundy finished adding a neat column of figures. "We'll haul from your mine to this field in a local scow—ah—for five quintas per load," he said precisely. "That includes insurance, of course."

McNulty's lean fingers gripped the arm of his chair.

"Clipper did it for three." His voice broke on a high note.

"Ah yes, but did Clipper ever bother about such important details as insurance, thermal control, or safety factors?"

McNulty shut his eyes. How often had he called Clipper a robber! Of course the fat scoundrel had never fussed about safety—why should he? Clipper earned his name by clipping off all possible corners, taking chances that made even jet-happy boomers flinch.

"All right," McNulty agreed bitterly. "Five quintas!" It was the same bid submitted by other transit companies. Not a one of them had a decent sense of competition.

It was when Car-Bundy was ushering McNulty from the office that they heard the first uneven sound of jets outside.

Only one ship ever made a racket like that—Clipper's scow. So McNulty waited curiously, for Clipper had told him that he was going into business for himself.

The rusty ship swung heavily over the concrete landing strips, aimed for the one nearest the office, blasting sooty smudges with an erratic waste of heat. Car-Bundy, at the entrance beside McNulty, clucked in disapproval. The strip had been spotless before Clipper filthed it up.

The scow made a screeching landfall and its jets plopped to sulky mutters.

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Clipper swung from the pilot blister, waved jovially at the control tower, then waddled for the office. His fat frame still bulged in the same blue overalls and his stubble of whiskers was caked with dust and crumbs.

"I got a load for you." The snag-toothed smile shifted from Car-Bundy to McNulty. "I'm competing with you, Mr. McNulty!"

"Mining phrenite!" McNulty stared. "Where?"

"If that's phrenite," Car-Bundy interposed hurriedly, "I'll order it unloaded. Your—ah—ship doesn't look too safe!"

"Ain't a leak in her," Clipper boasted. "And she's chock-a-block full, too!"

The administrator hastily beckoned a messenger.

"Where's your mine?" McNulty demanded.

"Ain't saying." Clipper wiped his mouth on a sleeve.

McNulty tugged his whiskers. No one could blame Clipper for being wary of claim jumpers, what with the untidy state of the law on Venus. But it was unpleasing news. Up till now McNulty owned the only phrenite mine on the planet; so, while Clipper dickered with Car-Bundy over shipping costs, he went to take a look at the load.

It was high grade ore all right, as good as his own—which meant that his monopoly had gone aglimmering. McNulty returned thoughtfully to his car. He was whistling a toneless dirge, bleak as a Scottish moor, as he headed for home.

THE MINE was a sink-hole twenty miles south of Olympus, an open sore in the endless stretch of jungle. Like a monstrous soup plate full of unpleasant liquid, the quagmire was fed by a dozen little streams which drained from the teeming native villages. On the edge of this bog stood the equipment which nibbled the mud for precious phrenite.

As McNulty crossed the only dry spot near the crew's quarters the damp streamers of fog rose from the mire to obscure his way.

"Faugh!" he muttered.

If he could only spare the money to drain that bog he would lay bare the fortune now engulfed in muck. As it was, the slow seepage covered all with a sluggish ooze.

Despite the late hour, the dredges still slurped up the sticky mud, ladling it into conveyors, whence it gushed through the separator stages. Gray ore slid into the tanks, while the residue drooled slowly back into the swamp. The air was sticky with the odor of decaying matter.

Above the clatter of dredges McNulty yelled to his partner, "Come to the office!"

And here he told McClanahan the news. It was bad. Both realized the result of having to pay higher transit costs, and the end was inevitable when added to competition from Clipper's new strike.

"We need more capital, Ian." McClanahan rubbed his leathery chin. "We have to get rid of this muck. We'll have to borrow money!"

"Over my dead body,"—McNulty snapped. "We'll have no other scut weaseling a profit from our hard work."

McClanahan shook his grizzled head. They'd discussed this before. "Two more men got sick today. Same thing—Venus warts. We'll have to ship 'em home."

"And pay their way!" McNulty groaned. Workers didn't last long. There was no escape from the ever-present mud, the miasmic fog that rose in fungoid wreaths, and native labor was out of question. Venusians never work—it's their Garden of Eden.

"Another thing," McClanahan said, and dragged out a ledger. His gnarled finger pointed to their daily output. It had dropped again! They were twenty per cent under normal production.

"The men are loafing, the hyenas! We checked the machines last week and we know they're all right!"

"No." McClanahan threw down the book with a soggy plop. "The men are working."

When the two had first noted the drop

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in output a few days back they'd checked the dredges and conveyors, even the tanks. It had been a heartbreaking job, climbing over the messy frames, and they had found nothing out of order.

"Today, while you were gone," McClanahan said slowly, "I looked about for signs of trucks or secret caches, even for a wee bit of piping stuck somewhere unbeknown."

"Ye think someone's high-grading the ore?" McNulty looked aghast.

"Mm." The other's nod was backed by years of experience in mining. "I can smell a rat, even in this stink. We're losing ore. Clipper says he's found a new phrenite mine some place."

"Ye think—" McNulty breathed hard. "Ye lost your fountain pen and watch one time," he agreed thoughtfully. "Clipper's a fast man at filching grub, too." He scratched his craggy nose. "But he's no magician."

Clipper would lift anything not solidly welded down, that was understood. The game of outwitting the light-fingered scow captain had kept them all on their toes.

But now it was a game no longer. This was deadly serious. McNulty's frosty eyes narrowed at another thought, roused by his own mention of magician. There was something that weird native had tried to sell him a while ago, a machine to move his ore without effort. But the freak had demanded a ridiculous price for it.

McNulty never paid ridiculous prices, except when men like Car-Bundy got him over a barrel. So he'd chased the native off. A fellow called Ezzo. Could it be that this Ezzo and Clipper were working together?

But first the two partners must find out where the ore went. And that would cost money, watching and waiting. McNulty tugged his stringy whiskers. Time and money wasted while they worked like dogs, with no idea where to look for the leak, no clue to the tool or machine that was used. They didn't even know for sure that Clipper was the guilty one.

And then a wintry smile touched McNulty's lean face. "We'll see Tony Esposetti," he said.

"The cook?" McClanahan blinked.

"Ay. Tony's doused our grub for months with his blasted garlic. He's got tons of it. Must remind him of home." McNulty tapped his partner almost playfully. "We'll flavor the ore with it!"

Despite Tony's heated protests they took his garlic and, while the Venus bats circled in the dark, they squeezed it till every last nubbin was gone. Next day McClanahan fed the garlic juice into the ore at the separator.

If anyone noticed the odor it was put down as only one more note in the symphony. By night the whole output of the mine was properly scented. And the tally was again below normal.

"All right!" McNulty wrathfully prepared to leave. "I'll watch at the spaceport till it shows up. It'll be in Clipper's scow, I bet!" He snapped a small traveling case shut.

"You find that Ezzo and bring him here," he told his partner.

"Who? Me?" McClanahan looked outraged. "Why, that—that son of miscegeny ain't safe to—"

"Ay, you!" McNulty rasped. "Bring him in. I'll talk to him!" And, before the spluttering McClanahan could find the right words, he stamped outside.

AT THE spaceport Car-Bundy was delighted to see him.

"Here's your bill—payable on the tenth," he added diplomatically. "Come and have a drink."

"Ay, but only one," McNulty decided frugally. Then he explained that he wanted to stay at the port a couple of days. "It'll be a bit of a change," he pointed out.

This was quite reasonable. The spaceport was clean as a surgical table, the guest rooms were positively aseptic, and the service was djin-like. Certainly a change from the sink-hole, even though it was a little difficult to relax under the fussy eye of the administrator.

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"Not that I'm really a stickler," Car-Bundy added after mentioning that his guest needed a little sprucing up, "but one—ah—never knows what important person may drop in, you understand."

On the second day Clipper's scow labored over the horizon and dusted into port, renewing the sooty streak in front of the office. The ship was rustier than ever and Clipper himself, as he jovially greeted them, made Car-Bundy shudder.

"I'll unload that—that wreck," the administrator said stiffly. "But I must insist that you repair your jets. Just look at my field!"

"Sure, sure." Clipper spat deftly on it. "I'll buy a couple of jets off you, if you wanna put 'em on the cuff."

"Certainly not!" Car-Bundy snapped and stalked off.

As Clipper headed for the bar, McNulty trotted across the strip to take a look at the disreputable scow. It was already being unloaded, and he thrust his head in beside the suction pipe of the unloader to inspect the dark tank-hold of the ship. There was a terrific odor of garlic.

So! It was Clipper, high-grading the ore. The scut! But how? McNulty inspected the landing skids of the ship. There was only rust and soot, no swamp mud. He climbed to the pilot blister and looked for the log book.

In the drawer was nothing but an old shirt, some dried sandwiches, and a set of brass knuckles. McNulty clucked disapproval. Evidently Clipper didn't believe in keeping records. Also, the bulkhead door leading to the hold was rusted tightly shut. There was no chance to enter the cargo space from here, so McNulty returned outside to the unloader port.

He was halfway through the opening into the hold when a grimy paw descended on his lean shoulder.

"Now, now!" Clipper was grinning, but his free hand gently swung a glubor bottle. "You seen enough, ain't you?"

"Ay." McNulty slid to the ground.

"Not that I wanna be unsociable." Clipper deftly tapped his bottle on a rivet, neatly severing the neck. "Here's mud!" He gurgled the beer, keeping one pale eye cocked on McNulty till the bottle was exactly one-half empty. Then he extended it with a hospitable belch.

"Here. A little snifter goes good after a hard day's work."

McNulty was still struggling for words when Car-Bundy arrived, slightly out of breath.

"See here, Mr. Clipper," he snapped indignantly, "you can't go smashing glass on this field!" His immaculate toe pushed the broken glass. "There'll be a twenty-mil charge for cleaning this!"

"Make it fifty." Clipper grinned and dropped the rest of the bottle with a foamy crash. "I'm a capitalist now."

BACK at the mine again McNulty found his partner waiting impatiently.

"About time you got back," McClanahan declared aggrievedly. "Ezzo's in the office—tied up."

The Venusian's feelers jerked erect as McNulty slammed open the door, then they drooped forlornly again. He whimpered.

"So!" McNulty glared at the little figure. Ezzo's hoofs were securely manacled to the chair he occupied and his prehensile arms were fastened in a squirming bundle. McClanahan had inventively used sticky surgical tape, McNulty noted with approval.

"Ye dirty scrounger!" he growled.

"Oh, please. I didn't—I wasn't—" Ezzo gabbled. Then he gulped noisily and started over again. "It's all a horrible mistake. Oh, what a sin we did. I told Mr. Clipper not to do it," he wailed. "I urged him desperately, but he is a very strong-minded person." The pink feelers throbbed and his eyes gleamed moistly in the yellow light. "Ah, gentlemen, you don't know how my poor conscience longs to rectify this terrible crime."

"I bet!" McNulty agreed tartly. "So you and Clipper did rig up a high-grading stunt, you—you son of misery!"

"Let me loose," Ezzo whined. "Let me show you."

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"Don't do it!" McClanahan warned hurriedly. "He's hell to tie up again—like a mess of eels. With hoofs!"

"Ye'll stay tied till ye tell us how ye did it," McNulty decided.

Ezzo whinnied again, louder.

"The disgrace of it!" His taped arms undulated. "Oh, the loss of self respect! My rings are boomerangs of folly, circles of sorrow, alloys of—of —Mr. Clipper made me fasten one of them in the last stage of your marvelous machines. Oh, the imprudence, the lunacy, the—"

"How is it worked?" McNulty grated.

Ezzo tearfully explained, shedding formulae as if to unburden his soul. "Never again!" he wailed at last. "Oh, what would my dear, dear—"

But the two Earthmen stamped out, leaving him at the mercy of his now super-sensitive conscience. They took slickers and boots with them before climbing the separator channels.

Though the machinery was shut down for the night, the conveyors still dripped goo, they were cold and sticky, and alive with squirming marine insects which were stranded for the night. Both men swore as they picked their way along the metal runways, dodging struts and falling gobs of mud. But at least they knew what they were hunting for.

"Here it is," McNulty hissed at last.

His partner looked dubiously at the plain metal ring. It was a barrel hoop about large enough for a man to dive through. No one would suspect such an object. Yet, clamped to the frame of the last stage, the ring was so placed that a sizable portion of ore would fall through it before reaching the final conveyor.

But when McNulty stuck his arm through the ring, and the arm disappeared entirely, the other man looked more impressed.

"And I thought it was just a—a trick gadget!" McNulty pulled his arm into view again.

"About a third of our ore is falling through this ring." McClanahan touched it gingerly. "And it comes out where?"

"Clipper has the other ring in the hold of his ship," McNulty guessed. "He doesn't even have to load his loot." He gritted his teeth, thinking of their own labors.

"Toss a wad of nitro through the thing," McClanahan snarled.

"Clipper's at the spaceport. We might damage others." McNulty wiped a gob of muck from his sleeve and tossed it through the ring, where it vanished. "We don't want any law suits."

Then he stared after the vanished gob of muck. The disposal of that sticky mass was suggesting another idea. McNulty smiled forebodingly.

Leaving his partner to unfasten the ring, he hurried to their little office. Ignoring Ezzo's wails, he searched for the depth charts of the sink-hole. He was poring over these when his partner joined him.

"The ring's off. Now what?"

"We'll wait." McNulty rubbed his lean hands. "Ay, we'll wait!"

Clipper would be hoisting a few beers during the evening. He'd take off in the morning—late, as usual. He wouldn't fly far, probably just cruise about while the ring filled his hold with precious phrenite. The picture made McNulty gnash his teeth—Clipper floated in comfort aloft till he was loaded. Then he'd land at Olympus Spaceport and most likely complain to Car-Bundy of a hard day's work.

"Just wait," McNulty growled. "Ay, just wait!" Then he turned irascibly to the whimpering Ezzo. "Shut up! Ye'll go loose when we're through."

IT WAS nearly noon the next day when the partners climbed aboard their aquaplane with the ring.

The little plane threshed a mile out across the soupy quag, then McNulty shut off the jet and it leveled with a gentle splat. He taxied slowly, while McClanahan checked the depth chart; then halted. The sink-hole was a hundred and fifty feet deep here.

"Good. Toss the ring over," McNulty ordered.

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"The ring's worth a fortune!" McClanahan ejaculated.

"Not this one alone." McNulty smiled grimly, "unless we use it."

"Down there?" His partner pointed to the slimy depths.

"Ay." McNulty's whiskers feathered out in a grin. "On the bottom there'll be a mite of pressure. That water and muck goes in our ring—and comes out where?"

McClanahan stared. Then his own dour features lighted. He even guffawed. He was still chortling as the ring slid reluctantly into the ooze. Almost immediately a current was evident, there was a sluggish, but definite, stream toward the disappearing ring.

"Man, what a sweet way to dispose of our biggest problem!"

"I want to see Clipper when he lands," McNulty chuckled drily, then gunned the little aquaplane from its sticky bed. "Let's get to Olympus Spaceport."

In the car they bounced swiftly for the port.

Nor did they arrive any too soon. Even as they alighted near the strips they could hear the stentorious thrumming of jets. Car-Bundy emerged from his office, a haunted look on his chubby face.

"Clipper again," he said. There was pained resignation in his tone, while his blue eyes rested sorrowfully on the freshly scrubbed runways.

Clipper was in a hurry. He had been aloft when McClanahan dropped the ring into the sink-hole. Now he came in, bumbling low over Olympus, with drivers screaming wide open. His landing jets seethed red, then purple, but he lost altitude in alarming wallows despite their terrific blasting.

The very air shivered with the strain. Other ships on the field thundered hurriedly into the clear, while maintenance men scooted for safety. Car-Bundy grabbed a passing mechanic.

"Call the control tower! That idiot's carrying double load. Warn him off—he'll tear up the strips."

Even as the messenger ran, Clipper circled in flaming desperation. His starboard jet coughed redly, belched a black fog, then ignitor pieces bounced along the field.

"Oh! Oh my!" Car-Bundy shut his eyes as the ship pan-caked like a dropped watermelon.

With a crunching thud that split a dozen seams, it bounced, scattering slush from the cracks. Chunks of concrete splintered from the strip in a final grinding screech as the scow slid to a lopsided halt. Dust and smoke swirled over the acres of field.

"I've seen better landings," McClanahan observed.

From the torn ship gobs of sticky liquid began to well. The stuff slid over the concrete, oozing out in a creeping circle that bore with it a squirming mass. Multi-legged wrigglers and eel-like things waved helpless tentacles, while the stench of rotting vegetation was blasted on high as the jets gave one last weary bloop.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Dust settled slowly.

Then the pilot blister burst open to eject a new gout of muck, this time bearing in its clutch the struggling form of Clipper.

"Get the crash wagon!" shouted Car-Bundy. "No—call the police!"

McNULTY hurried forward with the rest. The rusted door to the hold must have given way, judging by the steady drool from the pilot blister. Considering the handicap, Clipper had done a marvelous job of flying. Even McNulty had to admit he was quite a pilot.

Clipper had extricated himself from the creeping flood and was trying to scrape himself on a section of dry paving, now upended. Car-Bundy seized his arm, then let go suddenly.

"Get that—that abomination off my field!" he shrieked.

"Take it off yourself!" Clipper gasped. His bleary eyes swept the faces around him. "That was a dirty trick, Mr. McNulty," he said in grieved tones.

"How could you load so much filth?"

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Car-Bundy danced around the expanding blot. "It's—it's ghastly!"

"It'll soon cover the entire field," McNulty added.

"No!" The chubby administrator tore his blond hair, then hastily backed off as the green mud touched his white shoes. "Get that—that ark off my field!" he shouted.

"I can't," Clipper argued. "Let me dump the load, then maybe I can take off."

"On my field! Use my field for a—a—" Car-Bundy's face was mottled. "You take off," he choked. "Right now I'm charging you a hundred quintas a minute for space—and I'm going to sue for damages. I'll have your license!"

"It's a holdup!" Clipper yelled indignantly. "You big outfits always picking on the little guy! By hell, I'll—"

McNulty dragged the sticky Clipper aside.

"Ye stole those rings," he accused. "Fie! Robbing a poor native!" As Clipper tried to protest, he went on, "Anyway, one ring is at the bottom of my sink-hole. The other will spew muck till the hole is dry—but I might give you a fair price for the pair."

Clipper sneered, then he nervously eyed the muttering mob around him. The wail of police sirens drew nearer.

"I'll give you enough for a down payment on another scow," McNulty prodded.

"Gimme a contrack to haul all your grub and equipment too," Clipper urged hastily. "I got to make a living!"

McNulty nodded. After all, Clipper was an expert pilot—and cheap too. "But what about that native, Ezzo?"

"Ezzo owns half of all I got," the fat man groaned. "We made a deal. I thought—"

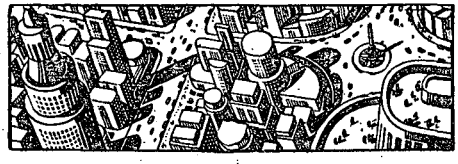
"Then I'll see he gets his proper share!" McNulty cut in sharply. "Now, where's that other ring?"

It was a tough job to remove the ring from Clipper's scow, but Car-Bundy eagerly hustled his men to help. They dragged it from the field, trailing a final stream of muck. McNulty anchored it in a deserted valley a few miles off.

Ten days later his mine was dry and the phrenite was filling his storage tanks.

He shipped one ring to Earth, while into the other he poured the ore. With instantaneous transit—at no cost—he was out of the red. He and his partner could laugh at Car-Bundy. Ay, they could even contract to deliver the mails.

And any time he grew tired of Venus, McNulty could hop through the ring himself, straight to Earth.



Through eons of Time came Ardath of Kyria, mobilizing the brains of Mankind for the creation of a new civilization in—

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

can't throw this new batch at him with a three-day deadline. And we can't let anyone else do the lead pictures. . . .

Ye gods—the departments are ten days late! Do you want to go to press without 'em? . . .

Check this cover, willya? I can't find a scene in the story that looks anything like this!

There's a fan outside to see you. . . .

Listen, we can use a page of book reviews here in the back. Read four or five of these books—take an hour—and gimme about two columns right here. Sure, pick any four or five. There's only nineteen waiting to be read. . . .

Say, we still need three shorts and a novelet for the next ish. . . .

Look, did you see this? Two of these stories you got scheduled for this ish have practically the same plot. . . .

Can't we do something about the reading? There are stories from 1910 on the bottom of that pile. . . .

There's a fan outside to see you. . . .

Hey, you know you got BEMS in practically every one of the illos in this issue? Damn thing looks like a zoo. . . .

Did you send those covers to the Chi convention? . . .

Here's the fourth letter from this guy asking when the hell are we going to read his story. We bounced it two weeks ago . . . what's the matter with the mailroom? . . .

. . . for page eleven. Just whip up a nice little filler about the latest cosmotron at Brookhaven. . . .

Take care of these releases for TV, will you? . . .

Say, I've got a great idea for a science-fiction comic! Look over this synopsis for me, willya? . . .

There's a fan outside to see you. . . .

. . . great publicity. Just synopsize about twenty of the best novels we've run and this guy says it's a sure thing. . . .

. . . if a rocket pushes against the air, how can it fly in a vacuum? . . .

. . . this guy says he's gonna cancel his subscription if the magazines don't stop coming all rolled up. . . .

Jack Vance is *so* Henry Kuttner! . . .

. . . . fan convention next month at Sauerbraten Tavern in East Liverwurst, N. J. Just make a short speech, answer questions from the floor, and bring along four or five Paul covers and some Finlay black and whites. . . .

. . . . wish to write for your magazine. Kindly send full details as to the stories you use and how much you will pay me. . . .

We can't use that story you advertised last month . . . the novel ran way over-length. . . .

. . . . can you tell me the pseudonyms of the following: Henry Kuttner, Robert Heinlein, van Vogt. . . .

This title is lousy. Got some quick brilliant suggestions for a new one? . . .

Hey, where are you going with my desk? To have it REPAINTED? *NOW?*

There's a fan outside to see you. . . .

ETHERGRAMS

FIRST reactions to the new cover format, which saw light with the July issue, have now inundated Standard's offices. No use our discussing them beforehand—they're all articulate enough (what an understatement!) so see for yourself.

FEM-FAN FUN
by Diane Tenglin

Dear Sam: Congratulations! The new cover designs are wonderful. Superb. They're even good! I especially like the new STARTLING heading. It looks a lot neater. Is STARTLING going slick? Thank goodness no. The inside is almost the same—new contents page is all.

PASSPORT TO PAX was very good. About KenFosCrossen's best so far. Get a halter on that kid, Sam. He's good. The others weren't spectacular but not a stinker in the lot. Good ending on COURTESY CALL. Unexpected.

Can I get in a plug for the "National Fantasy Fan Federation," the best club ever? Whether you're interested in active fandom, correspondents, or are just an innocent bystander, the N3F is for you.

Oh, yes, the cover. Very good! Just about perfect. I may be a little off though, I like people on my covers. Not necessarily uncovered; just people doing something. Who was that, by the way? As usual couldn't find any name.

Well, what do you know? Not a single gripe in the whole letter!—*626 Higbee, Burlington, Iowa.*

It was Schomburg. His name's on it. . . .

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR
by Richard Geis

Dear Sam: I thank you, and whoever else is responsible, for that wonderful new format on the

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July cover. It's beautifully neat, clean looking, no clutter . . . a proper cover for a science-fiction magazine. Once again heartfelt thanks. No longer will I fold your magazine with the cover inward, no longer will I apologize to that questioning raised eyebrow from some of my best friends. I notice that the contents page is boasting the same kind of change. Keep it up, Sam. By Ghu, maybe trimmed edges aren't too much to hope for after all.

PASSPORT TO PAX was a real fine novel. That narrative hook caught me right between the eyes and I couldn't get loose until I'd finished the story. It was two AM before I got to bed. Mr. Crossen is a very good writer. A very good science-fiction writer. In fact, he's almost *too* good to suddenly blossom forth as he has. Is it possible he could be a non deplume for "that man"? Okay, okay, stop grinding your teeth like that, Sam, I was only kidding. Still. . . .

COLLISION slipped down my gullet easily, though it left a sweetish aftertaste. Raymond F. Jones turned out a good "character change" story, but it seemed too pat, too contrived.

Of the short stories, I liked COURTESY CALL best. Ross Rocklynne hasn't appeared in START-LING STORIES for a long time if my memory serves.

I'd like your reaction to an opinion about science-fiction and fans that a former friend of mine advanced. What he said was something like this: "You guys have a chronic malady called Literary Pretentions. Usually caused by deep feelings of *inferiority*. For years you've been sneered at and called crackpots, fools, and worse. Now, with rockets and atomic weapons commonplace, and space travel a real possibility, you guys are having delusions of grandeur. You think all of a sudden you're respectable and making a Great Contribution to Literature. Damned little of that stuff is even barely readable, and the best you produce is just barely worth the time of a serious reader. And then only for pure entertainment of escape reading."

Now hold it, Sam. That's what *he* said. Not Me. Of course I haven't spoken to him since, and I am sneaking out tonight to booby-trap his car. As a loyal fan I felt that was the least I could do. However, a little voice deep within me keeps whispering that he may be partly right.—*2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon, Apt. 106.*

When your dyspeptic friend said *"You guys* are suffering from Literary Pretentions," how much territory was he taking in with the appelation of "you guys"? (Shouldn't it be youse guys?) If he means everybody connected with science fiction he is burbling through his space hat because I never yet saw the blanket statement that was big enough to cover everybody without some toes sticking out. On the other hand, there's no real reason why science fiction shouldn't produce some real literature, accidentally or otherwise, and it is a narrow-minded character who is pre-convinced it won't. Nobody in his right mind is saying that *everything* in science fiction is literature—sure there's a lot of crud published, but there's a lot of crud published elsewhere too, masquerading under the guise of modern literature and stuff. Fie on you for your wavering, Richard.

NO CHARACTER

by Lawrence Baidowsky

Dear Sam: I quietly walked up to the newsstand on 23rd Street and asked the dealer to give me a copy of Startling Stories. I put down a quarter and he handed the magazine to me. The little man was shocked and passers-by were horrified to hear me utter "egad, gadzooks, omigosh," and other equally profane words expressing extreme emotion (corny, isn't it?). It was the July cover of S.S. that caused this display. I was pleasantly surprised to see a cover by Schomburg that was not smeared with printing. I liked the new layout of the cover and I hope that this policy continues. I have not read the stories yet but they look good.

I have really written this letter to discuss your letter column "The Ether Vibrates." I have compared the letter column of the last few years with that of the letter column of before 1947. I have found that your letter column has become too formal and rather humorless. Frankly your letter column lacks "character." I have found out that before 1947 your letter column had more humor to it. Behold! I have discovered the reason why.

Before 1947 "The Ether Vibrates" was dominated by a character named "Sergeant Saturn" and some other things named Frog Eyes, Wart Ears, Xeno (a Martian brew made out of the unsavory juice of the Kiwi plant), and some other concoctions too obnoxious to mention.

Very few readers realized that Sergeant Saturn was just a psychological factor introduced by a smart editor to give his letter column character. It made everything seem more friendly and witty. Imagine how horrified readers would be if they saw last issue's stories rated in terms of jugs of Xeno, or in terms of wee little men as some stories were then rated. It is really too bad that reader opinion was turned against Sergeant Saturn because it was being overdone.

In order not to have assassins in front of my house, I will say that I am not in favor of the return of Sergeant Saturn. What I do suggest is that you make "The Ether Vibrates" less formal and add some humor to it. I think that this will make it more enjoyable and interesting.—*817 East 179th Street, Bronx 60, New York.*

Is there a revolver in the house? Not for you, Baidowsky, for me. Here was I under the naive impression that I was getting off a quiet quip now and then and the man asks for humor! Or is it strictly the "Frog Eyes pass the Zeno" type of humor you find funny? In that case, approach and let me whisper in your shell-like ear (conch shell, he means): *We've got Saturn, Frog Eyes and Wart Ears locked in the basement with 492 jugs of Zeno. Does you want to join the party, drop in at 10 East 40th any afternoon and we'll see that you get into the same cell.*

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THE ELVES MARCH
by Les Cole

Dear Sam: Many thanks are due you, and I have delayed out of (1) sheer inertia and (2) writing things like stories. (15,000 words last week, and if that doesn't impress you, it impresses me in narcissistic fashion.)

Firstly, thanks for the kind rejection slip on that last. This is important: there are editors who don't know how to write a rejection slip.

Thanks for the change in cover on SS. I was completely bowled over: It was a very fine cover, a very fine contents page, and what in hell has happened? You aren't aware of it, of course, but you ruined a fine gag of mine. I'm speaking in Chicago on the moon claim, and I had a lovely slide planned. It was a parody of SS cover. In fact, I had gone so far as to letter the damn thing in the old style; the title was Startling Tsorus, etc. In fact, s-f fans being what they are, I think I'll run it anyway, for no one will be the wiser.

Thanks for the egoboo. This we have put in the scrap book under the heading, "One Way To Get Onto A Contents Page." We haven't had so much fun since the story broke. Incidentally, I don't know whether you're aware of it, but there was a follow-up which got on some national wires. We received our reply from Schachter. It was about what you'd expect. But we had planned for such a brush-off, and thereupon—following legal precedent—announced that since no one knew anything about the matter, we were seizing the land and holding it against all comers. So far we have not been challenged, except by the usual assortment of crack-pots.

But the thing was a lot of fun. As nearly as we can figure, we got world-wide publicity: we have some clippings from Australia, Paraguay (that one is a dilly; it makes me out to be a geological debutante—according to our translation, which may be in error), and we made quite a few English papers. Wish I knew what the Russian papers said. Don Fabun has a re-cap of the claim business in the next Rd: check it if you're interested.

So, the thanksing has been done. Hope to meet you in Chicago.—*614 Norvell St., El Cerrito 8, Calif.*

If any of you are unfortunate enough to have missed the July issue of SS, then you missed the filler titled LES AND ES CLAIM THE MOON which recounted the adventures of our faithful correspondent in trying to get the United Nations to recognize a claim to a chunk of the moon and in beating off Alex Victor (inventor of the Victor talking machine) who says the moon is *his*. More fun. Glad this adventure in real estate hasn't clipped your writing time, Les. As for ruining your chalk talk on SS, all I've got to say is heh-heh.

THE HEART OF TEXAS
by B. G. Warner, Vice-Pres.
Texas Fan Club

Dear Smirking Sam: Loosen your Double-O Blaster and make preparations for defending your unworthy hide. You dared to change the design of the cover and contents page! Oh, Spats! How could you? I get used to seeing STARTLING STORIES splotched all over the top of the cover in a slight curve, and you have to go and change it to a straight type—and make the illo a mere 6 by 6 and 2/16ths! It's hideous. What's the idea? Trying to add a little maturity or something? (Don't get me wrong, Old thing, I'm not trying to start a maturity or not to be maturity controversy.) And the contents page. Ugh!, No! Ten million times never!

Ah, but you are forgiven. (Temporarily, at least, that is, I mean to, you know, say. Confusing?) The illos; with the exception of one or two, were just right—and how! Oh, that Finlay. He's my favorite Fantasy illustrator, you know. Cartier's muh favorite science fiction artist. (Very Strong Hint: As SS and TWS are science fiction mags, why not get Cartier to do some illos? Other mags have broken AS's monopoly on him—why not you? Hint Completed.)

The stories were good. More said would be superfluous.

In case this letter infiltrates the blue-pencil line, I should like to urge any and all fen in the glorious and exulted state of the United States of Texas to get in touch with me for information about the newly formed TEXAS FAN CLUB. We need members badly. Common gang!

Still sex is getting its usual beating and praise in the letter column. As for myself, I shall praise it anytime. Yeah, it's used widely. It's supposed to be. Some people seem to think that it's indecent and immature in a good s-f story. But I'm sure they use its benefits in their own ways. If it weren't for this thing called sex—WHERE WOULD WE BE? I'm afraid we wouldn't.

But opion (tsk, such spelling) opinions, that it, are for everyone, and I like to respect them all.

See you around.—*P. O. Box 63 Bessmay, Texas*

You've got a kindred spirit in the boy from Brooklyn below here, B. G. Couldn't you make him an honorary Texan, or something?

THE OLD GUARD
by Ray Capella

Dear Mines: Sam, boy, what have you did? What is you done? How can—now see what you've done? Your sudden change in SS has ruined my sense of expression!

I know—it seems I heard a little bird say there were going to be some changes made in your covers. But—not THIS! Didn't you know that the masthead of a mag and its lettering make up a lot of its personality? You is just spoiled the latter in SS!

Maybe you—or say, your art boys—thought THIS type of title would save space, and keep the lettering out of paintings. Well—granted it does, but the design and color make it look like one of those thud-and-blunder pulp mags on the newsstands today. Your former type of lettering would keep the mag's personality even if SS went digest-size and the lettering was cut down to size—but in the same type!

Why not do that now? If what you want to do *is* to save cover space, you can use the former title, but only in a smaller size! And if you want

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to keep lettering off your cover-paintings, then shove said diminished title onto a strip running along the top, with the rest of the blurb. The story titles can be put in a strip running along the bottom of the page—a strip preferably the same color as the upper one. As it is, with margins all around, it's mighty unattractive. This might be one fan's opinion—but I believe there's a majority with me.

Among mags publishing both stf 'n fts (fantasy, Y'know) there's only two that have done so successfully, and pubbed good novels continuously. One is a bi-monthly. The other is SS, and it certainly had an edge over the former. So don't go spoiling its natural-born individuality. Otherwise—SS is as terrif as usual-cover-pic included.

Might as well go on to request for Brackett, Blish, 'n Fred Brown—preferably long novels. Got any around? I'll leave you with these thoughts. . . .

"Out of the minds of fan ofttimes come BEMs."
—*480 Clinton Ave. Brooklyn 16, N.Y.*

Egad, somebody's always trying to throw sand in the gears of progress. But so help us, these two were the *only* letters squawking about the change and we printed both of them to show how disgustingly fair we are. Just a couple of hard-shelled lil scapers, as Pogo would say.

GHU GHU
by J. Martin Graetz

Dear Sam: It's Beautiful! The first glance is even more startling that the old lightning lettered cover. And the Schomberg is great! Marvelous detail.

Seriously (and who wasn't before?) it is a step like this that helps bring the Stf pulp out of the ordinary pulp category. The farther from sensationalism that you get, the more it speaks for stf-dom. As far as the new cover, I think it is as good a layout, if not better one, than on some slicks. A bordered painting, free of print, square letters, and what I hope will become an unchanging color scheme on the spine, are all marks of a fine magazine. I like that yellow and red division of the cover.

The contents page is good looking, too. You finally got rid of the Roman numerals, but I noticed that the next-issue date was skipped.

And now to TEV. (expression of lust and avarice.)

First blood is drawn by Coyote Seibel. Just a scratch, however. He didn't leave much for us. But even if he doesn't believe in mythology, he shouldn't stick an extra "l" in Thomas Bulfinch's name. Or maybe there's a joker in the composing room?

Wot? No Moskowitz-for-Cap-Future plea?

I've carefully avoided any controversy about sex in s-f. Looking over the letters, I think that if I said anything, I would be hearing anguished cries of "Plagiarism!" I'll just say that I agree completely with Peggy Frye, and with Gregg Oopsla, Jim Harmon, and Rich Geis. They've said it, no need for me to say it again.

Please, Sam, no more population figgers. 'Twas bad enough before, but now with an S curve. . . .!

Let's to the stories. Shorts first. (I know this is contrary to custom, but it's the way I read 'em.)

As far as I'm concerned, England was discovered so that Arthur Clarke could have a place to write stuff like ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD.

I dunno about NEW UNIVERSE. Too much left unsaid. Who was Zaron and how did he get to be ruler &c? Otherwise a good story.

THE BEST POLICY started out like too many invasion stories told from the viewpoint of the alien, but I liked the idea worked in. A dig at our dear old advertising-and-propaganda society. Ever notice, when you come right down to it, that advertising and propaganda are the same? Soap vs. Detergent. 20-inch tube vs. 21-inch. Democrat vs. Republican. Communism vs. Democracy. And Samuel F. Public has to absorb it all without a word. Thank God for TEV!

Other shorts were good. I got a kick out of Lemuel Higgins.

COLLISION was a very good novelet. A solid story that you like to see often. Nobody expects every story in every mag to be a collectors' item.

PASSPORT TO PAX was another good, readable story. One question, though. If Caristia meant to save Jair Holding, why did the steel bale (Page 28) swerve over him as he jumped out of the way. Maybe she was just tired. Or suthin'.

Say, why don't you grab a hold of Walter Miller, Jr., again? Since you ran SONG OF VORHU, I've seen his work in almost every other stfmg (ooh, what I said!) 'cept the Thriltwins. How about it?

Well goo'by for now. But gimme room for a plea. If there's anyone listening that is a wheel in the INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFICTIONAL COUNCIL,

WHEN IN THE NAME OF GHU DO I GET MY MEMBERSHIP CARD?

Till then, my address remains.—*307 So. 52 St., Omaha 3, Nebraska.*

This kind of letter is always unsettling. Every time we get ready to jump on Marty with our special hob-nailed-boots-for-jumping-on-fen, he says something complimentary and this throws us off balance and we like to break our neck. Probably a plot. Watch those compliments, kid.

A LOW ROAR
by Peter Frailey

Dear Sam: I suppose I should start off by giving voice to an ear-splitting howl of approval, but, being sedate by nature, I shall herewith utter a mildly dull roar in praise of the new cover policy, I always did like Schomburg anyway, and the new format "does it up brown." (I don't know where I picked that up; it just popped into my head and out of my fingers.)

TEV was good as usual, but I'm betting that you're going to regret that half-formed invitation to Sabretooth Seibel anent his submitting a manuscript (?) to prove his capacity as a genius.

A box of gift-wrapped skyrockets to Peggy Kaye for the most sensible letter in quite some time.

Having had the impulse to write this letter before I finished the mag, I can't comment on the

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Crossen opus, but if it measures up to his previous work—oh boy! One thing puzzles me, Sam—in the Clarke short, Ashton was faced with loneliness and isolation as the only alternative to dropping the field. However, the field had a radius of seven feet, so why couldn't he have walked up to some pretty girl and enveloped her in the field too? It would have spoiled the ending, but it's perfectly logical. (You and your education!—Ed.)

One parting shot, and I'll quit. I am an amateur artist of sorts, and if anyone running a fanzine along the Eastern Seaboard would like some artwork, cartoons, or just about anything at all, I'll be glad to hear from them.

Thanks for list'nin', Sam.—*5055 Bradley Blvd. #4 Bethesda 14, Md.*

Snarly Seibel knows better'n to send me any stories. So long as he doesn't write any he can be superior about the junk we publish, but the minutes he desecrates a ream of white paper and offers it, still hot and palpitating, for public criticism, he's a dead duck.

You should be popular, a lot of fanzine eds are screaming for art work and stories. Good luck.

BACK NUMBER DEPT.
by Vernon Hough

Dear Ed: I am writing to ask a favour of you, not to tell you how good your magazine is. (Though I don't dispute the fact that it is most completely excellent). Recently, (within the last six years), either TWS or STARTLING STORIES printed a story entitled THE BLACK GALAXY. Is it possible to get that issue of one or the other of your fine mags which contains this story? If you cannot supply me with this copy, then would you please forward this letter to some fan who could? I wonder if I could possibly get the other story of that series? (THE STORY OF ROD CANTRELL). I would be willing to pay full price or more for either of these mags, (or both), providing that they are in fair shape, i.e. no pages missing or torn. Congratulations for your fine magazine, by all means KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!!!—*Rimbey, Alberta, Canada.*

THE STORY OF ROD CANTRELL appeared in STARTLING STORIES for January 1949. THE BLACK GALAXY appeared in the next issue, March, 1949. Unfortunately, as I have had to explain before, we do not stock any back copies. But this letter should get you some responses from people who might have the ones you need.

HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE
by Fletcher Holding

Dear Sam: Good taste, it would seem to me, indicates that an initial letter to any SF mag should at least be friendly. Blasting one's way in has little merit from the viewpoint of social protocol. So, before launching into the purpose of this letter, I'd like to say to you, Mr. Editor, that you sell a lot of magazine for a little quarter. You manifest excellent taste in the choice of stories, the art work is quite good and the editorials indicate the presence of an active, impartial and humorous intelligence. Your publication is a source of entertainment to me the work behind which does not go unappreciated.

NOW, you anti-sex morons, read me! There is just ONE race Homo Sapiens. It consists of two divisions, male and female. Aside from the isolated situations in which the author chooses to develop a plot wherein the presence of a man or a woman (or men or women), would be extraneous to the narrative, how might he write a logical story dealing with human beings while ignoring these divisions? It it not common knowledge that the whole consists of it's component parts; i.e., people equal men and women? And is it not true that minus a few exceptions, the typical science fiction at least attempts a fair and logical treatment of the subject with which it deals?

So to the syllogism's conclusion: a story dealing with people as we know them must necessarily deal with men and women, or women and men, if you prefer that arrangement.

Now the hard part. In a human being there is what psychology calls a "reproductive drive." It is commonly known by the less ostentatious term, "sex." This sex drive is instinctual, ubiquitous and NORMAL. If one did not object to committing oneself, one might even go so far as to describe it as, "pleasant."

But regardless of one's personal attitudes toward "it," one must admit that it is present, active, and must be contended with. When a writer describes a singularly appealing female anatomy, devotes a number of words to the desire apparent in moist sensual lips or a perfect male specimen, he is merely permitting the reader a glance or a prolonged evaluation, through his character's eyes. He is not being smutty, he does not have a fixation, his mind is not warped. He is, quite simply, relating one facet of his character's nature which is essential to telling that character's whole story.

Or, in infinitely simple words, sex can only be nasty to a nasty mind. The road runs both ways. If the reader regards the phrases that pertain to sex as distasteful, the fault lies within his mind, and not in the phrases he reads. Since SS has never been lurid, sensational or pornographic, such interpretations must needs exist in the cerebrum of the individual.

If you print this, Sam, Thanks.—*Box 182, Mammoth Springs, Yellowstone Park, Wyoming.*

Thanks for the assist—there's little I need add to that. And a bow to you for the mention of the work which maybe doesn't show around the edges of SS, but which gets mighty hectic at times. Good taste, of course, is something controversial itself, but the heartening thing is that you get as much correlation as you do from people whose judgment you can respect.

HE MEANS STARTLED
by Craig Sutton

Dear Sam: I am astounded . . amazed . . han-

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bergasted! Your short stories in the July ish were *good!* Yes, after that long, uneventful—even boring—age when you had no story worth that name, the dearth has at least temporarily ceased. I won't say all were good; MR. CIRCE was almost not worth the ink it was printed on, and NEW UNIVERSE was only ordinary. But the rest. . . . ah, the rest!

ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD was good from my standpoint only as a result of its good style. But the style made it well worth reading. COURTESY CALL was one of the best shorts you've had in a longer time than I care to let you know of. Besides, you know that yourself. THE BEST POLICY had imagination behind it, and was written with a good humor vein. The idea has been worn somewhat, but it was presented in a manner slightly different somehow. All in all, the shorts were very and surprisingly different from your usual stuff.

The longer ones were, as usual, good. 'Nuff said.

I gotta complaint. The editorial, or whatever you call it that you put with TEV, was okay, as far as it went. But you stopped before you explained the connection between fruit bugs and humans. Unless you clarify, I can't see why, just because a few flies ceased to breed, we should follow suit.

Keep Crossen coming. You've had a lot of his stuff; he's okay.

Tell Snarling Seibel, Sabretooth Seibel, Sleezy Seibel, or whatever he may like to call hisself that sound effects are good in movies ONLY. Could it be that he is, really, Al Capp in disguise? Those gurgles, gasps, and so on are. . . . no—guess not. On Capp they look good.

Ever think of getting a little Papa Schimmelhorn by one R. Bretnor? How many has he written, anyhow? Sit on his neck or something, and let's get a little action. Your stories, though good, get a little run-of-the mill after a while when all you see is droll after droll. Even pie-throwing coud be funny after such eons of silence in the humor line. C'mon. . . .

Lessee, now. . . . maybe this is short it'll get printed. That is, if it ain't too libelous. Guess I'm not up to par today, though. How in the happy name of whoever you want can anybody get a cold in ninety-degree temperatures in the middle of May? But I turned the trick. My alleged brain has been in its usual fog, only this time it was more of the smog variety. There is a difference, y'know.

Goom - by.

o

Though we are slightly confused by it all, we take it that you meant to be generally complimentary about the short stories. Maybe we confuse easily, but the technique of striking each story over the head with a blunt instrument, hacking off a few fingers and toes—then finishing up by saying they were great stuff—this baffles us. Oh, well.

The editorial didn't explain the connection between fruit bugs and humans? Sorry. The life cycle which was worked out for the fruit flies and which appears as an upright S on a graph, has been found to be true for all life processes—plant, animal, human and things connected with them. It works apparently even for business—you can plot the growth and decline of a business by it because human energy is involved. Got it?

Am surprised to hear you grumping like a gnurr about no humor in SS. Humor is mostly what Crossen has been writing, and Fritch and Roger Dee—we buy every decent one that comes along. True, lots of it is droll, not pie-throwing, but a couple of those have even snuk in lately, so keep an eye peeled, but ready to shut when the pie comes through.

SUCCESS STORY

by Florence (Mrs. Anthony) Tindall

Dear Mr. Mines: You have my most fervent thanks for publishing my letter in the May issue. You'd be surprised how much fun I am having with the correspondents I now have because of that first letter. One of them is from the same city where I was born (Kansas City) and gives me much local facts and gossip. I got a perfectly lovely invitation to the Souwestercon and I'm going too. Maybe when I return from same I will be a real fan or as one of my correspondents says, "wedgies over Maybelline in science fiction."

You have done one bad thing, however. By putting my immortal jewel in print you are giving me delusions of grandeur that I might possibly be able to write something readable. I used to write poetry. Has anybody ever written any science-fiction poetry? I am going to think long and hard about it and see if I can come up with some. Think the fans would like it?

A big bouquet for publishing THE HELL-FLOWER. A very fine space opera. You are a good man doing a good job on a very fine magazine.—*1637 Cowles Ave., Long Beach 13, Cal.*

Has anyone ever written science-fiction poetry? You mean nobody has sent you fanzines *bulging* with the stuff? Take to the hills, the second deluge is about to hit you! Fans spend all their time either writing letters to the prozines or writing poetry for the fanzines. More science-fiction poetry is written yearly, it is estimated by the reliable historian, Lucius P. Nudnick, than the combined speeches of Senators and Congressmen as published in the *Congressional Record.* (Let's see you figure that one out.) Anyway, I'm glad you're popular.

STOP THE PRESSES

by Leonard Gleicher

Dear Sam: Many thanks for printing my letter. This is an appeal. Hellup! To all who have written: thanks. To any others who are thinking of doing so, please don't as if you do I won't have any spare time left. I hate to discourage you but I've got six already. Their pages range from 13 to 41—yes! I said 41 as I tend not to write letters but novelets. My letters are so long I have to pay 35¢ postage and over here that's 2/6d. Mul-

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tiply two shillings sixpense by six twice a month and I'm broke. You'll hear from me in detail a little later.—*1 Tenterden Gardens, London, N.W. 4, England.*

HE LIKES US

by Bob Fultz

Dear Sam: The June and July ishes of SS were the first I'd picked up since Sam Merwin lit out for the greener pastures. . . . so I gotta risk the wrath of all and say that I wish he was back. That's not a total condemnation of *you*, Sam, either—I put a lot of the blame on the readers. *They* were the ones who wanted SS put on a monthly basis; now they see what they got, I hope. The stories have deteriorated, the letters are again dominated by the goshwowboyoboy type of juvenile fan, and worst of all, the fanzine review has gone all to pot. Bixby had nine reviews in the June number and seven in the July ish. That's not too bad for a two-month period, but look at the number Merwin used to review every two months: The top ten and sometimes ten or twelve more, besides.

I'm disgusted, but what's the use?

I *was* surprised to see the cover format changed . . . but to my notion TWS needed the change far more than SS. One thing I really do like about the new format, though, is that the lead stories are listed below the illustration. Now if you'll just trim those ragged edges. . . .

Only two stories were even worth glancing at in the June issue. Vance's SABOTAGE ON SULFUR PLANET, and Townes' PROBLEM FOR EMMY. The latter story was one of the best "automatic brain" tales I've ever had the pleasure of reading. But I wonder why Orban always pictures a thinking-machine as a ticker tape. EMMY was supposed to have been fifteen feet tall and twenty feet wide!

In the July ish, the best story was Arthur C. Clarke's ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD. But Ashton wouldn't have had to live out his life in isolation—he could've brought somebody else within the field of the bracelet, couldn't he? But a darn fine story, anyhow, and a new twist on the time-travel theme.

PASSPORT TO PAX disappointed me. . . . I had expected something a whole lot better out of Crossen. It kind of started out like a satire, but by the time I got halfway thru, I didn't know what to call it. Phooey. Crossen had better stick to Manning Draco if this is the best he can do without him. And Raymond F. Jones' COLLISION was one of the most sloppily-sentimental pieces I've yet read. MY GOD! What has happened to these guys? Are they that washed up?

At least I'm glad TWS is still bi-monthly!

Of the letters in the July ish, Elyn Smith's was the best- written. Maybe that's why you put it in first place? She put the situation, oh, so accurately. The cover on this ish was the best Schomburg I've seen gracing your old pulp. What a beautiful rocket that guy can turn out!—*Rte 1, Box 203, Tamms, Illinois*

I was having a good time reading your letter and then I got down to the fifth paragraph and you disappointed me. You *liked* something! Pshaw, you're not really trying. See if you can't do better next month, huh?

POLITICAL NOTE

by Gregg Calkins

Dear Sam: In this year of Presidential nominations, I would like to put in my vote for Mines for President. Pick your own party. Or, if not President, at least editor of the Congressional Record. Wow! just think of a Congressional Record reading like *Startling Stories!* It would revolutionize government! But, you ask, why Mines for President? I'll tell you, sir. The July issue of SS with the terrific (1) new format beats the rest of the field all hollow. From the cold, distant shores of *Galaxy* to hot, panting bleats of an immature *Amazing*, no other magazine can touch you. Of the half-dozen digest-sized magazines in the field, they run from a semi-literary magazine of "high-quality" to a crudzine of the lowest of the low. They all cost 35¢, and none of them are worth the honest price of SS. And none of the other pulps can even hope to compete.

I predict that in 20 years from now, the Mines era of SS (unless you're still going, in which case it will be the early Mines era) will be in much more demand on all dealers' lists from here to Luna (yes, we'll be there by then, along with our science-fiction.)

Let's look at the July issue. The new format is truly the best in the field. The setting off of the picture by two-colored borders is a great idea, and leaving a place for the story blurbs at the bottom of the page instead of on the cover painting is just too good for words. Notice I say painting instead of illustration for that cover. Truly Schomburg outdid himself on this one.—A more magnificent, a better, a more well-painted cover has never before graced a science fiction magazine. True, I can dig up some arguments for it, on the basis of ship design and other small points, but you can see by their pettiness that I would be grasping at straws to find something to complain about. It's beautiful. It symbolizes all the dreams of the future, actually, with the buildings standing off to one side, and the great rocket leaving on a regular run to Luna or farther out. It depicts in one picture the symbol on the interconnection of our age with the age of the planets. Schomburg, I salute you!.

With the revamping of the cover, the contents page takes an over-haul, we see. And, truly, it is again the finest in the science fiction world. Against it I have but one point, and it is the same one I brought up so long ago—where is the date of the next issue on the contents page? Perhaps you forgot it, this time, and I am talking out of turn, but I hope you don't plan to lose it for good, Sam.

I envy you, Sam. You've got the job I would give my eye-teeth to have—the successful editor of the top-promag in the field. If you get as much satisfaction out of selecting the novels and novelet's as we do reading them, you live a happy life. And, to congregate with all the fans in the stf world like you do, by way of THE ETHER VIBRATES would be the greatest joy in the world for me. I like fans, and I like science-fiction. This "issue" of TEV was truly the funniest and best ever, which seems to be about par for everything in this issue. Those letters are great!

This question you asked about sex really brought a lot of the readers out of hiding, didn't it? And the most voluble appear to be the relatively few feminine readers of the field. You bring up a very

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good point after Elyn Smith's letter (if he's a she, that's a beautiful name) in what Angela sees in Roland—to wit, $. But the point is somehow neglected in your batting around the ball, about the cases in which the hero is always the rugged, space-tanned man of immense strength and judgment of lightning speed. Which brings up another point. Some fans with their cries for some "down-to-earth, human characters" just don't know what they want. "A real, next-door-neighbor type" they cry, "one whom we can associate ourselves." Phooey! You can see where that will lead. Listen, Sam, let's stick to our same old rugged heroes of EE Smith, or the tough guys of Heinlein's style. If I want a down-to-earth, helpless man for a hero, I'll go look in the mirror, and if I want a next-door neighbor type, the guy on the left hand side of me is home after five o'clock. Nosir, we didn't have our Frank Buck stories cluttered up with the average, the weak and the helpless undecided man of average America, and let's keep space the same way—for the strong, the quick, the valiant. Populate it with heroes, both male and female, and let us thrill to their adventures, leaving Tom Brown and his 40 inch waist-line safely home on earth.

Don MacKechnie, Peggy Kaye, and all the others, I love you. Sam, you have the best letter department I have ever seen. A trace of fire through old Sabretooth Seibel (but not the rampaging fires of an out-of-hand feud), a trade of praise, (but not the "I-am-great, so-are-you" type so often seen), a trace of a grouch, a bouquet, a brickbat, a foreign letter, or one from good old Home-town, USA,—oh, it's just plain and simple great, Sam.

You can slop some of this praise over Bix's way, too, if you like. However, I sometimes wonder about that boy. In the Summer FSM you noted after my letter for me to look in SS for Bix's review of OOPS. I looked in the June ish, out two weeks when FSM came out—no review. Now the July ish comes—still no review. I wonder. . . .

Just for kicks, Sam, lest I write a complete letter without a gripe, let me say that you pick short-stories with your eyes closed, I believe. Nevertheless, even then the smell should have led you away from some of them. But, this isn't really a good gripe, because I seldom read short stories anymore—especially in back issues. They just usually aren't worth it. Your novels (JOURNEY TO BARKUT, HELLFLOWERR (!), DRAGON'S ISLAND, PASSPORT TO PAX) and novelet's (LOST ART, THINGS OF DISTINCTION, THE GNOME'S GNEISS, COLLISON) more than make up for it.

One more thing I could ask for from SS, if it isn't too much. I hate the very thought of SS going digest, so please don't, but could you possibly trim the edges the way the large aSF and the present WSA used to do and do?

Enough from me for a month, Samuel. Keep SS a mixture of stf and fts (fantasy)—just the way it is. I love it! Regards to Bix, and I hope to see you both at the greatest convention yet, the CHICON II. I want to shake your hands. Tell me just one thing. It's an idea that has often bothered me. How does one become the editor of a stf promag from a lowly fanzine editor?—*761 Oakley St., Salt Lake City, Utah.*

Really should introduce this kid to Bob Fultz; that would be a battle worth watching.

Want some questions answered, Gregg? Yours is a good point about heroes being heroic. An average man for hero is okay as a change, but it you want heroic doings you can't confine yourself to the timid soul too long.

Don't know why you gripe so about the short stories. I think myself that a lot of them are superior to the long stuff, and I am baffled by the invariable tendency to rate the novels first even if it is (sh-hh) a stinker that shouldn't have got by.

How do you get to be the ed of a prozine? Pick out the mag you want to be editor of and sell them a flock of stories—what am I saying? No, here's the way you do it. Find a rich uncle. . . .

THE STAR TRAVELER

by Joe Semenovich

Dear Mine Sam (so I ain't original) Why didn't you tell us? It was rumored (I should say I read it in Fantasy Times) that you were supposed to make some cover changes, but I didn't expect something like that July issue. Schomberg went to work again, and my tongue is already hanging out waiting for the next issue to see how Bergey looks in the new format.

Now to discuss the mag! (an old but noble phrase.)

Of course, to start the issue right, I opened to the letter column. One page passed, and I saw that my name was missing, two pages, three four, and still my missive was missing. Sweat began to roll down my brow, my eyes were tearing. Semenovich! I shouted out. Where are you? And try hard as I could, I could not find my letter. I swore by Pogo that never again should I buy your wretched mag (after of course, all my letters were published) and I even swore, that although I liked Crossen, I would not read PASSPORT TO PAX nor any other story in the magazine. But when I gazed out the window, I saw that small drops of H20 were falling from the sky, and that there was nothing else to do but *read.* My mind was in a turmoil; should I read that dirty rag of a magazine called STARTLING STORIES or should I sit and mope about my letter being missing? Tune in next month for the thrilling adventures of The Star Traveler. Will he read SS, or won't he?

Of course, you already know the answer. I began to thumb my way to page 12, and immediately started on Crossen's novel. When I finally finished it, I shrugged mentally. So this is a novel? I said to myself. I sat stationary, trying to figure out whether I liked it or not. As it turned out, I liked it. I still think that it was corny as all hell. To tell the truth, I knew the ending from the beginning. The only thing that made me read on was Crossen's wonderful style.

I then read MR. CIRCE which I found fairly interesting. That's about all I can say for it. Jones was as good as ever, and the same goes for Clarke. Morrison and Smith—oh well, what do you want for a quarter—Rocklynne? I'm still trying to decide.

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Once more I read The Ether Vibrates. This time more carefully, still hoping you know what. Once again, I saw Seibel in the letter column. As usual, he wrote a history. And I thought he wasn't going to waste his time reading your hackneyed crap. Anyway, that was the impression I received from his last letter. Didn't you, Sam? I then read Kir's letter. I met him once—nice chap. Ten to one he'll be one of Ether's regular writers.

I wonder why I write letters to editors? Hmm, that is about the most stupid question I have asked myself. Why does almost every other fan write to editors—to see his name in print. After a while though, it doesn't mean anything. You get used to it, and the only thing that persuades you to keep on writing is the fun. I get a big kick out of rereading my letters. My God, I utter, did I write that horrible mess? I now know why I receive rejection slips. Probably, when I reread this letter, I'll ask myself the same question. What I'm waiting for is when I don't ask myself that question!

One thing about me. When I write letters, I don't make any people smarter than they already are. In fact, I doubt if I ever say something intelligent. Many letters, you see people trying to teach you something. I try not to—the reason for this is that I'm not an authority on anything—if I was, I'd blast off.

When I read the last page of Ether Vibrates, I received the greatest shock of my life—I was mentioned after all. Yes, the old Star Traveler was still in there pitching. Oh Sam, if only you could publish my stories.—*40-14 10 Street, Long Island City, N.Y.*

Why should we publish your stories when your letters are funnier?

LOST ONE GAUNTLET

by Jim Harmon

Dear Sam: You fairly flang the gauntlet into my cherubic face in replying to my letter in the July STARTLING STORIES. Pardon me while I put it and a mailed glove on and return the compliment.

You use the rather time-worn example of the Ubangi woman to demonstrate that the female form is not objectively beautiful. We might also consider Arab women who are not considered attractive unless they weight at least 300 pounds, and a number of other examples. But to return to the Ubangi lady, I think I could recognize a savage, primitive beauty in her despite her unwashed condition and her deformities. That's the key word, you know, Sam—*deformity*. The Ubangi girls with their bound and elongated necks and heads and their stretched lips, as well as the enormously fat Arab women and the rest, are deformed and do not possess the normal femminene form. Of course, the norm isn't always beautiful but the above-norm or ideal female is. Such women do exist in the civilized world and they don't have to wear make-up or girdles.

Of course, men who can't get such ideal women settle for the average female, but that just proves that the sexual instinct is stronger than a sense of beauty, which is one of Man's fainter and finer instincts. As for an abstract beauty in the human female's body, I believe there is one. After all, the femminene form is—ah—spherical in nature, and in Nature, the sphere is implicit in all things of beauty. Then, too, please notice how the female figure balances in hips and breasts. Balance, repetition is fundamental in design and design is necessary to beauty—even disorder, abstraction is design of a type. There is also balance in the front view. Please note—two of just about everything. I think at least some types of non-terrestials would consider our beautiful women beautiful in at least the way we consider fine horses and dogs beautiful.

Speaking of things of beauty, Sam, your new cover design is the best-looking one I've seen on any magazine, science fiction or not. (Down, Boy, down.) I particularly liked Schomberg's moon. All in all, it was one, if not *the*, best cover you've had on STARTLING.

I also liked Crossen's PASSPORT TO PAX, although it was garnished lightly with corn in spots; like where Jair and Carry fly through the air with the greatest of ease like Clark Kent in his underwear, and where the Paxians dance down the path before Jair scattering rose petals. All the shorts were quite good, which is unusual, as was the artwork. Jones' novelet, COLLISION; was a fairly good story, and I suppose that for the sake of the story, big business did have to be made out of villain but I object to this as a continuing cliché of popular fiction. These days, most people are opposed to both the theory and practice of Communism—since it is considered the thing to do—but they also seem to be equally opposed such symbols of free enterprise as big business and the individual of private wealth. This is obviously a dislike born of prejudice and envy and I don't think it should be pandered to. Unfortunately, it is, even in the confiscatory tax laws passed by our incompetent, stupid, dishonest representatives in Congress—the U. S. Congress is one of the finest ideas in the history of government, but it's unfortunate that one has to be a politician to be a member of it.

Our family is relatively poor but I don't envy, and therefore dislike, wealthy persons and corporative business so much that I want to take their wealth away from them by unreasonable taxes, or by violent political revolution, which are not far apart in psychological motivation if not effect.—*427 East 8th Street, Mr. Carmel, Ill.*

You're all wet, James, beauty is whatever the fashion says it is. Obviously Arab and Ubangi men *do not* consider the normal female figure beautiful or they would not go to such lengths to distort it, obviously also they consider the distortions beautiful. The same goes in the U. S. where periodically women are forced to be curved or thin, flat-chested or bountiful, with hips or without, waistline up or down, hair long or cropped like a poodle's, nails long and blood-red, or silver, black and other hideous combinations, heels high and tottering or none at all—the list is endless. And all of these are considered at some time or other beautiful, in direct antithesis to what was considered beautiful the year before.

As to your example about dogs, there you

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really put your foot into it. Consider what man has done to the English bulldog: bowed his legs, thrust out his jaw, all but eliminated his nose so that he wheezes asthmatically—and this is called beautiful. Oh, well, I've said enough, let the rest of the boys take it from there.

NEVER DUMPY
by Marie-Louise

Dear Mr. Mines: May I tell you how very much I enjoyed "The Best Policy"? Phyllis Sterling Smith has, indeed, a lively sense of humor. I thought her tale deliciously funny.

Illustrations were fine, too, and oh how I love the Finlay works of art. His drawings have an elusive, beautiful, dream-like quality about them that no other artist seems to capture. For the very real joy his lovely illustrations give me, I should like to thank him very much.

The TEV section is my special pet. I read every letter, and some of them are marvelously entertaining. As for your comments on each one, they slay me. However, for one of your rash statements, I call you to task. Quote . . . "the average, actual female tends to be dumpy." What a nasty, cynical whopper! You might have said gallantly, "The average female tends to be constructed on a smaller, daintier scale." Dumpy? I am small and feminine, and definitely NOT dumpy!

This is my first venture into the letter column of a magazine and I've had so much fun I shall certainly be back again.—*P.O. Box 31, Danville, Penna.*

Egad, I never meant *you* were dumpy, I said the *average female*, and of course the average is only a statistic and doesn't really exist at all, therefore there are *no* dumpy females. There's a nice piece of logic for you and the fastest retreat on record. Anyway, the least you can do is send us a picture so that we can check this scientific fact for ourselves.

SHE PLEA
by Mrs. Bethel Heller

Dear Mr.Mines: Will you please print this letter? Please?

Notice to all H. Rider Haggard fans. There is in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., one never-published "for copyright print" copy of a Haggard story he called LADY OF THE HEAVENS. Now if all of you who would like to see this tale published and would buy a copy if published will write me a 2¢ postcard saying so, I will forward all cards to a publisher I am in communication with regarding this story. Our combined efforts may help to persuade him.—*13541½ Tolton Ave., Corona, Calif.*

If you're Haggard, get your two cent postcards to the wheel.

COVER TROUBLE
by Lee Huddleston

Dear Sam: Here's some more of those "fulsome frolix." Really, Sam, I can do nothing but brag on your wonderful mag. I got the July ish yesterday. So far I've only read MR. CIRCE (poor worm) and TEV but I must rave about your cover. As Gregg would say, "Goshwowgeewhizoboyoboyoboy!" plus a couple of million additional superlatives.

I've got a problem. Faye has liked S.F. since I introduced her to it a year ago. Not so her aunt with whom she stays. Those covers are the reason. She has seen them at the stands and thinks they are indecent. (Heaven knows what she thought of the real trash cluttering up the stands.) I knew nothing of this until a few weeks ago when I loaned Faye vVogt's "Mission: Interplanetary." A few days later she told me that her aunt had found and burned it. Then she told me the auntie thought it indecent. I offered to write a note of explanation to auntie and tell her that S.F. was actually one of the cleanest of literary classes and tell her something about it. Faye said her aunt was queer and that a note would only make it hard for her (Faye) who would be accused of trying to get outside help to change her aunt's opinion of that vulgar trash.

I beg of you: What should be done?—*Route 1, Baird, Texas.*

P.S. Keep printing Seibel's letters. I like 'em.

This is going to be hard, boy, but the decision is clear and unmistakable. There's only one thing to do. You'll have to get yourself another girl. When it comes to a choice like that. . . .

CRITIC
by William W. Llewellyn

Dear Mr. Mines: I think before you start blowing off about the world population and how much the world will support you had better read some books on the subject, such as ROAD TO SURVIVAL by William Vogt, HUMAN BREEDING AND SURVIVAL by Burch and Pendell, DESERTS ON THE MARCH by Paul B. Sears, RACES LANDS AND FOOD by Mukerjee, etc. —*50 South Second St., San Jose 13, Cal.*

Are you sure I haven't read some of them, Bill? In any case, the material I used as reference for that piece was more recent than these, and much of that early stuff is already obsolete. For example, the whole problem of soil erosion has been completely altered by Monsanto's development of Krilium, about which *you* ought to read. Furthermore, the interesting thing about cycles is that they always seem to work out, regardless of the changes that have taken place in the meantime. They seem to come true each time *for a different reason*, but the interesting thing is how they come true, regardless of changes in technology, social customs and education in the meantime. Take the cycles in women's clothes for example. Would anyone have dreamed, in the face of continued liberalism in styles, that last year we would go

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back to long skirts and bustles and Gibson girl shirtwaists? Yet the cycle was right in there pitching—you always get it after a war—the tightening up that follows war fever.

FLAT ON ITS UGLY FACE

by Ralph P. Belsinger

Dear Sam Mines: Well, here we go again. First the sex was on the covers. Fandom's fury (or folly?) chased it off and into the story, where I sincerely hope it remains. As long as it is a natural occurrence and is not dragged in by the ear, I fail to see why the allegedly intelligent and mature readers of SF should object.

About the sense of beauty minus sex appeal—who can say? If we listen to Freud, we are all like the Frenchman who said the Empire State building reminded him of a beautiful woman—everything we see is viewed in terms of sex, which is an obvious absurdity.

And incidentally, your example of the Ubangi woman falls flat on its ugly face. The stretched lower (upper also) lip is definitely not a mark of beauty. Quite the opposite. It is intended as a deterrent to would-be adulterers through making the wife so unattractive no one excepting her husband, would want her. How the husband feels about seeing that face on the pillow every morning is something my source of information neglects to state.

Ubangis and other Africans, however, do consider certain kinds of mutilation to be beautiful. They worship the exotic and unusual, hence the so-called "white gods" etc. (Personally, having seen statues and paintings of various African gods, I'd consider it a gratuitous insult to be mistaken for one.) Hence, also, their belief that albinos of their own tribes are a mark that said tribe is favored by the gods.

Back to Science Fiction. (Down, boy, down!) The new format I like. Especially the cover picture uncluttered by printing (oh frabjous day!) There is now only one further improvement to make. All right, fellows, all together now: WE WANT TRIMMED EDGES!—*1622 Blair Ave., Cincinnati 7, Ohio.*

See reply to Jim Harmon. Your theory on the Ubangis has several large holes in it. Item, the elongated necks and stretched lips are started when the girls are three or four years old, so that they have this handicap to contend with in *catching* a husband, which, if you were correct, would drive them away instead. The longest neck and largest lips are considered the most beautiful; your informant errs. Item, the effect on friend husband himself would be the encouragement of neuroses and nightmares as even you have uneasily noted.

DR. PEARL'S PEARLS

by Dick Clarkson

Dear Sam: I'm gonna fool ya! You thought I'd babble happily about your new format. But I ain't gonna. I'll just say it's a terrific improvement. Let it stop there.

Re ye editorial. I got a question. Just what makes our dear Dr. Pearl say that the human race will continue to increase only up to a certain point? Just because every time zinc plus sulfuric acid has produced hydrogen, is it absolutely safe to assume that it will always do so? Besides, where is there any connection between fruit flies (or sweat bees, cockroaches, or any other species of assorted or unidentified six-legged critters) and the human race? I can't see any from here. Besides, did Dr. Pearl ever put any humans into bottles and have them breed? Can he prove that, just because a few bugs happily cease to breed at a certain point on a graph, we, as humans, will do the same? Why, shucks, just look at any bug, then at any human, no matter how ugly he may be. Is there any remote connection? Even the interior decorations and functions differ radically. Until you can give me far better proof than fruit flies, I prefer to think that we people won't give a hoot how many babies we have. Me bhoy, something just don't smell right.

The moon? Why stop there? I'm gonna claim Mars as soon as I see if there's anything there worth claiming. If not, on to Venus! The Elves, Gnomes', and Little Mens' etc. definitely missed a trick there. Who can tell? There is more chance of there being more elves or what have you on Venus or Mars than on ye satellite. "There is no air, and that ain't fair, to birds, or bugs, or bees." Where did I read that profound statement?

You continue with good novels and novelets. But. . . .

Did I come into the middle of something? Guess I did. You were having a wonderful time in TEV slandering all and sundry, with particular emphasis on one S. Seibel. I musta missed an ish. (Not that I give a hoot, but that must rankle the editorial ego.)

One thing. As far as story ratings go, you'll never get any from this end. Can you tell me just where this is good? I can see no point in it—none at all. F'rinstance: a story may be low on the totem pole one ish, when in the next one it might have been tops. If (and I encourage this) in one certain ish, all stories were top-rankers, to give them a rating would be to say that one masterpiece wasn't as good as another. Whereas had they been spread out over a few issues, they might, one at a time, all have placed number one. And so on.—*410 Kensington Rd., Baltimore 29, Md.*

There is plenty of connection between cockroaches, fruit flies and the human race. As already explained, the life cycles hold true for all forms of life—this life force, whatever it is, that makes things tick, seems to follow the same primal law of nature. So you think you're prettier than a bug, do you? Not to another bug you ain't.

PULP-LESS

by George Stevens

Dear Ed: WOW! What a beautiful ish! Your new cover plan is the *best* of *any* stf mag on the market. And Schom's cover. Just out of this

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world! The only thing that marred the cover was that D—d "Now published every month" Please, I implore you, take that off. All the interior illos were good.

That's a nice way of fixing up the title page, but why did you do away with the line telling when the next issue will be on sale. Also why not put the illustrator of each story under the story?

Since you've taken over the reins, Sam, it seems that the covers and the stories have both improved. Just keep up the good work.

I wish you'd publish this plea. Up here in 1949, it was hard to get pulps. Luckily by going down to Seattle and looking around Vancouver I managed to get all but one. That was the January 1949 Startling. If any reader has a spare one, please let me know.—*1608 West 28th Avenue, Vancouver, B. C.*

If you will elevate your baby blue eyes to the top of the cover on this ish, you should see (unless the printers have crossed us up) the new heading. Is that service?

THE STALWART
by Mrs. Eunice Shaver

Dear Mr. Mines: Yep, here I am back again. What's that moaning sound I hear? Could that be you? I know what you're thinking Sam but it won't happen you poor deluded man. I have a lot of paper and stamps, and I intend to keep writing until you pay some attention to me. So if you think throwing my letters in the wastepaper basket, and hoping that next month I won't write is going to work you can stop hoping, it won't work. I am a very determined person when I make up my mind to be. So break down and publish one of my letters and maybe I will be nice and stop writing.

The stories were all good this month here's how I rate them—(deleted by popular request.)

The best letters this month were written by Willie Miller, Richard E. Geis, Peggy Kaye, and Marion Cox.

I'm for you Marion. I like men too. That's the girl, Peggy, just what I wanted to say only better put.

What makes Donald C. McKechnie think Americans are "ostrich minded?" You'll find people like that every place, at least everywhere I have ever been. At time I am forced to agree with him that some Americans are pretty funny.

Martin Gross, I have never seen anything I liked about Steinbeck's novels although I have read most of them I fail to find any likeness of his characters to people. They are to me neausating, depraved and I think more than a little mad. Pardon me but if you don't like S. S. why read it?

Jim Harmon, Despite the fact that I am only a normal woman I think I can truthfully say that I have had my share of male admiration. Being five feet ten inches tall and weighing around 200 pounds no one could compare me with a sunset or a cloudless night yet I received at least six or seven offers of marriage before I finally got married. And for some reason my younger and more attractive sisters always had trouble keeping a boy friend if I decided I wanted him, which they will cheerfully tell you if you ask them, now that we are all happily married.

As for Sabertooth Seibel as you call him the things I would like to call him would land us both in jail. So that Anthropological Phantasmagorial Throwback to the Neanderthal Age thinks he is a judge of S. F. does he, he should take a book of fairy tales and get lost. If this is full of mistakes it's because I'm so mad at Seibel.—*612 Hamilton St., Houston 3, Texas.*

Well, you made it. I figured it was better to break down and give in now than put up a long hopeless struggle and have to give up anyway. If this gets you mountains of mail from the fen it'll serve you right.

WORDS AND WISDOM
by Jim Leake

Dear Master-Minds: Having once more received full value for a quarter rendered, I feel that I may plunge into fevered correspondence with your august self in the full knowledge that I have perused, pursued, disected and bisected, analyzed and panalyzed your latest effort with a rich understanding, a lenient eye, and indulgent smile, all of which evidence of feeblemindedness is eliminated by the fact that I do write you; after all, who am I to hide my shining light under a bushel of words? Also, I want in on the current free-for-all re: (hush . . . is Junior safely abed?) sex. (shudder, shudder, siiiiggghhh!)

Listen while the oracle pours forth golden words of wisdom:

Everybody's got sex.
Everybody knows it.
Writer's capitalize on it.
Why the fanfare?

Among the readers of stf are many people who thoroughly enjoy great literature, which is great only because the authors were superbly skilled in the observance, interpretation, and representation, of human nature. Some of this great literature carries passages which are lewd, licentious, etc. etc., ad infinitum; for example, I refer any who wish to check to a couple of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a page and a half (if my memory serves me correctly) of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, commonly known as the "Golden Ass", and sections of the Bible. If you object to reference to the Bible, read the Old Testament with an open mind, as a book, not a Holy Fetish. Every piece of great literature that deals with humans that I have studied inculcates sex to some degree, in some way . . . and if anyone even whispers "John Donne's Sermons" now I shall personally undertake to educate him/her on the difference in great sermons and great literature; I'll spare you now, though, Señor Sam.

The July issue was superb. COLLISION was a masterly piece of writing; seldom does one find such detailed craftsmanship expended on a piece of writing of less than novel length. It is excellent in an over-all sense, though detailed study shows many imperfections in technique. I don't suppose I should really say that, though; on the other hand, it is the first time I have accorded to a piece of stf writing the "honor" of critical survey, after it was cold, using the same standards applied in my studies of great literature. To me, though, stf has always

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been a "one shot deal"; read it once, and go on the first impression. Sorry now I went back and checked, for the first impression was that this was an excellent story, well written. I still consider it way and above the general run of stf. PASSPORT TO PAX was also downright fun to read; the equal of the best, with a few notable exceptions, of lead novels. It didn't impress me so strongly, though, because the length of a novel always provides the writer with a better vehicle for creating living characters.

I have come to enjoy the Vibrating Ether as much as the stories you run. Thanks for the honorable mention; that's twice you've done that, and I feel more honored than if you had printed the letters. *Bravo!* on your cover trend, but don't run it in the ground; the fen will raise hell by the hinges thereof. I enjoy gazing on a lucious lovely just as much as the next man, but the background and her companions can ruin a cover, especially if the damsel on the cover wears the vapid, personality-less expression usually portrayed. If she is in a mell of a hess, why not put an expression of horror on her face? If she is happy, let her smile (or, better yet, *grin* occasionally). Even the Vulcan Doll on the cover of the Feb. ish does not wear an expression that means anything. While on the subject, and airing beefs in that general direction, let me speak against high-heeled slippers; they are contrary to practicality; in addition, however much they may beautify the female leg (and who denies it?) in life, on the cover of a mag they seldom do.

A word on Jim Harmon's letter. "Speaking of breeding", I would like to point out that, while it *may* be true in general history, in one specific instance inbreeding did not produce decadence in the products of the inbreeding: the Incas. The Inca could only marry his sister, if my memory serves me well (don't have the text at hand); for numerous generations Incas and their sisters interbred (close enough inbreeding?) and produced offspring capable of ruling an empire. While some may take the attitude that the empire was decadent (and I am not well enough versed in the intricacies of the subject to dispute it authoritatively) I believe that study would reveal that the Inca himself was never more moronic than the general run of rulers in countries where inbreeding was tapu. Incidentally, will some reader enlighten me as to the origin of the "incest tapu"? It runs in my mind that science has proven that when neither strain is characteristically weak, inbreeding tends to produce offspring that are above, rather than below, the norm. All human cultures seem to carry that tapu to a greater or lesser extent, from which it can be argued that: (1) it is instinctive, (2) that homo saps was once concentrated in a small group, and some wise leader decided he must spread out, (3) homo saps as a race was once widely scattered, and wise leaders decided to increase not only the population, but the amity existing between them and their neighbors, or (4) it is a result of a "deux ad machina", a concept installed in the race by an outside agency. I stress the idea that it is not a natural welling-up-from-within concept, for lesser animals appear to have no revulsion at mating with kin as close as parents. For that matter, a pair of sisters didn't either, if you'll believe your Old Testament.

Incidentally, the copy I had that ran "Dragon's Island" was mutilated at the presses or the bindery; the story jumped from page sixty-something into the next story, and I couldn't find another copy in town. Got my quarter back, which I promptly turned in on Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles" which, good as it was, was a poor substitute for the ending of a story in which I had become very interested. Wha hoppen? Will somebody take pity on me and send me a copy (complete) or tell me the ending? (preferably a copy). Will gladly send 'im a quarter.

Thanks, Sam, for a pair of great stf magazines. Keep them coming! By the by, I notice the general trend of ads running in stf is picking up. Congratulations!!—*1120 Euclid Ave., Bristol, Va.*

Not only Incas, Egyptians too. The only one good enough to marry an Egyptian prince or princess was a brother or sister, so there was a long line of inbreeding. True, true, morals are only what society says they are at any given time.

Oh, me, there are letters left—too long to print. Terry Zimmerman of Boonville, Cal., Box 21 wants to swap mags—needs those from the forties. Marvin Mauch of 801 Fourth St., Bismarck, N. D. wants all the old back issues he can get. W. Paul Ganley wants to know how we could have bought a certain hunk of tripe called PASSPORT TO PAX. Wilkie Conner has a new address: 1514 Poston Circle, Gastonia, N. C.

Fred McClendon Jr. of San Antonio, Texas, wishes Snarly Seibel would either get lost or write in English instead of Al Capp-isms (yerkp! akkk! gasp!) Dave van Arnam wants trimmed edges and pocket size. Andrus Offutus managed a pretty funny letter in his own version of pig-Latin (his second offense, since Lemuel Mutton consigned the first to the wastebasket) which was unfortunately too long to run. Ronald Levine of 2121 N. Evergreen, Burbank, Cal., who is only 13 years old wants to know if there are any young fan clubs. (Haven't you heard of the Little Monsters of America?)

Maurice Charles Link had much to say, including the offer of a .30-30 rifle to take care of Seibel (funny, but too long, Maurice). Joe Gibson had some ideas on world population and space travel. Wallace Parsons wants to get his English teacher into TEV, and Flavio Trevino thinks the girls on the covers are too undressed. There was also a plea for Cap Future—no, not from Hank Moskowitz—from Mrs. L. E. Arentzen of 747 Lincoln Ave. Ext., N. Charleroi, Pa., who will pay 15¢ for back copies of Cap Future, plus postage.

That tears it, gang.

See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

WE'VE so darned many fanzines on hand that we've decided to give with quickie reviews instead of analyzing the contents of each and every one with our customary perception, sensitivity and brilliant—

Who *threw* that!?

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-07 32nd Avenue, Flushing 54, New York. Editor: James V. Taurasi. Published bi-weekly. 10¢ per copy; twelve for $1.00.

If you're interested in reliable, up-to-date news of science fiction activities, fan and pro, and are not subscribing to F-T, you got rocks. Best "newspaper" in the field.

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST, 2524 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley 4, California. Editor: Don Fabun. Published ten times a year. 30¢ per copy if mailed; 25¢ if bought at newsstands (no kidding, fellers! . . . you getting newsstand circulation? If so, orchids).

One of the most energetic and provocative fanzines around . . . approaches the status of "little magazine." Which may not be surprising when you consider the size of the operation—lots of talent sweating over RD. Styling and artwork excellent . . . lots of color and wit. Material always interesting, often controversial, sometimes irritating when you happen to disagree . . . oh, well—who *isn't* opinionated?

Here's the final straw on that p. 57 snafu . . . it's Gottesman.

PSFS NEWS (which we presume to be the official organ of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society or something on that order). No address, editor (Dave Hammond?), price (free to members?) or frequency of publication listed.

One mimeographed page of chatter and comment on PSFS doings . . . personal stuff.

STRAIGHT UP, 37 Willows Avenue, Tremorfa, Cardiff, Glam., South Wales, Great Britain. Editor: Fred J. Robinson. Published monthly. 2/6D for six issues; 5/- for twelve; six issues for one 35¢ U. S. promag.

Nothing has happened to change our mind about STRAIGHT UP: mimeographing still horrible; contents still lively, varied, worth a gander.

[*Turn page*]

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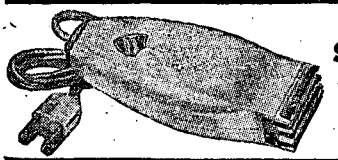

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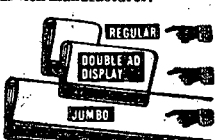

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THE ZOROME #1, 2010 McClendon, Houston 25, Texas. Editor: M. McNeil.

What happened to TRILOBITE?

This one's a lightweight . . . seventeen pages, measuring 4" by 5", held together by a paper-clip; contains two reprint pieces, both from FANTASY MAGAZINE: *The Ultimate Ultimatum* by Robert Bloch and *Alicia in Blunderland* by P. Schuyler Miller. Cover is photograph of an illustration by Frank Paul from WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, Summer 1930.

Stories amusing.

THE PHOENIX, 933 West Latham, Phoenix, Arizona. Editor: Jeff Taylor. Published bi-monthly and irregularly (done with mirrors?). 10¢ per copy; 50¢ per year (six copies).

Pocket-sized. Mimeographing on the p-f-f-f-t side. Articles, reviews, poetry, a story; centerfold of artwork. Not bad. Aren't those small pages difficult to work with, by the way? . . . the bigger ones always seem to pan out better.

MACABRE, Box 969, 905 3rd Avenue, Seattle 4, Washington. Editor: William N. Austin. Published occasionally. Free to FAPA members; 25¢ to non-members.

Whipped up for the 59th FAPA mailing, and very impressive it is. A detailed run-down on the horror-terror-sex-and-sadism pulps which crawled from beneath a rock, and then back again, during the 30's, together with a thumbnail analysis of the relation which horror fiction bears to the stfantasy picture as a whole; (many early stf authors—Zagat, Ernst, Burks, Schachner, Cummings, Kuttner, Long—ground out horror by the coffinful; and many of their stories were legitimate—if purplish—fantasies, despite the fact that editorial practise usually demanded that the "vampire" turn out to be a screw-loose surgeon with a siphon).

Recommended to collectors who work the borderline.

OOPSLA!, 761 Oakley Street, Salt Lake City 16, Utah. Editor: Gregg Calkins. Published every sixth Tuesday. 10¢ per copy.

This newcomer is coming along right well, we-thinks . . . contents sprightly, mimeographing quite good, interior art better than average. Ward's art this ish is distinctly better than his previous efforts . . . you feeding him raw steak or something?

THE ALIEN, 212 West Avenue, Cartersville, Georgia. Editor: Vic Waldrop, Jr. Published bi-monthly. 10¢ per copy; 50¢ per year.

A first issue . . . fair to middling. Seems a little hard up for material; two pages are devoted to nothing more than a list of recent promags and their contents, author and title, which seems to us the epitome of something or other. Give it time.

VULCAN, 138 Laidley Street, San Francisco, California. Editor: Terry Carr. Published quarterly.

A FAPAzine . . . tiny little item, 4" by 6" . . . this a trend or something? Enclose magnifying glass with fanzines hereafter, please. Contains articles, poetry, artwork. Looks like it might develop . . . a certain gleam in its eye.

VIEWS IN SF, 802 West 35th Street, Baltimore 11, Maryland. Editor: Ray J. Sienkiewicz. Published monthly. 10¢ per copy; 12 for $1.00.

"One World" issue, containing several pieces, mostly satiric, on that theme. Also news, reviews, letters. A steady comer.

SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM—An Introduction, Box 182, Broadway P. O., Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

A concise and readable breakdown on what, who, where, why are fans . . . by Graham B. Stone, who also sent us—

STOPGAP, "A Letter, Circular or Publication," Box 182 etc. (as above). Editor: Graham B. Stone.

Some promag reviews, letters, some data on fandoings Down Under . . . a bit on the undernourished side, but on the other hand very little waste blubber. Mimeographing good. Makeup displays a lack of fancy-schmancy decoration and salad-dressing which so often fronts for not-so-hot material. Result: a sort of dignity.

OPERATION FANTAST HANDBOOK 1952, No. 28 PCLU Detachment, BAOR 29 (c/o G. P. O., England). Editor: Capt. Ken F. Slater (RPC).

Ve-e-e-r-ry nice. A handbook covering just about every aspect of stfanning, collecting, fanpublishing . . . no actifan should be without one. The amount of material crammed into 41 snazzy photo-lith pages is astonishing. Write and get a copy, quick like a bunny. 75¢ to Ken Slater brings you the O. F. jackpot . . .: a subscription to OPERATION FANTAST and a variety of valuable services to boot.

STARLANES; 1558 West Hazelhurst Street, Ferndale 20, Michigan. Editor: Orma McCormick. 10¢ per copy.

Fan-poetry and a cross-word puzzle . . . pleasant enough.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER, P. O. Box 702, Bloomington, Illinois. Editor: Bob Tucker. Published bi-monthly. Seven issues for $1.00.

Fine job, as always . . . this one and Taurasi's FANTASY-TIMES compete for top honors in the news field, with the former having an edge in personality and readability and the latter in timeliness and straight reporting. Together they give you just about all the fanews there is to get. Too bad Tucker is planning to close shop . . . no other around like SFNL.

CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION, Box 1329, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N. Y. Editor: Ronald S. Friedman. Published weekly. 15¢ per copy; $4.00 per year.

News and some chatter . . . good reproduction.

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QUANDRY, 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia. Editoress: Lee Hoffman. Published "almost every month." 15¢ per copy; three for 40¢.

Speaking of personality . . . here's one with zip and sparkle to spare. Articles, stories, letters; and over all the stamp of la irrepressible Hoffman.

THE OUTLANDER, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California. Editors: Rick Sneary and Len Moffatt. Published irregularly. 15¢ per copy; seven for $1.00.

Third Anniversary Issue. Gags, satire and chatter . . . good for some yaks.

THE BULLETIN OF THE CLEVELAND SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY, 12701 Shaker Boulevard, Apartment 616, Cleveland 20, Ohio. Editor: Harlan Ellison. Published monthly. 15¢ per copy; twelve issues and an annish for $1.50.

Harlan Ellison, whose pilgrimage to Better Pubs we satirized in the Frying Pan several months ago, has come up with a zine . . . a big one, crammed with fanstuff ranging from good to God-help-us. H'm . . . a closer look reveals that this is issue #12, so it's no newcomer. Lots of news, reviews, some stories, poetry . . . and lots of effort. Keep an eye on it.

And for the last time: H. Beam Piper is positively *not* H. B. Fyfe. We've known both for several years, and will happily cover all bets on the matter.

ORB, 1005 East 60th Street, Chicago 37, Illinois. Editor: Bob Johnson. Published three times a year. 35¢ per copy.

Elegant production . . . contains poetry, reviews and stories, the latter seeming a bit on the precious side.

Aside to Johnson: we knew a Bob Johnson years ago in Lincoln, Nebraska. He liked stf. You him?

CONN FAN, the Official Organ of the Connecticut Science Fiction League, RFD #7, Norwich, Connecticut. Editor: Charles Lee Riddle. Published monthly.

So now there's a Connecticut SF League . . . under Lee Riddle's able guidance. All interested fen in that vicinity please drop him a line.

The 'zine itself reports on the organizational meetings, etc.

PHANTASMAGORIA, 22 Marshfield Place, Bradford, Yorks, England. Editor: Derek Pickles. Published irregularly.

Mostly stories and poems, all quite readable . . . also departments and letters. We liked this:

Shine on you, pretty little planet,
How I wonder who is on it.
Look! that sudden flash of light;
Obviously ACC in flight. . . .
Anon.

Whew . . . we just got in under *that* deadline. Hey, copy boy!

—JEROME BIXBY

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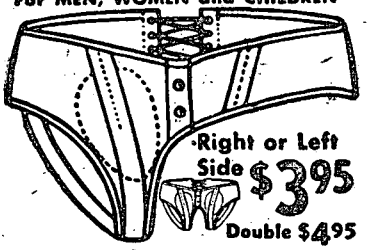

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Science Fiction

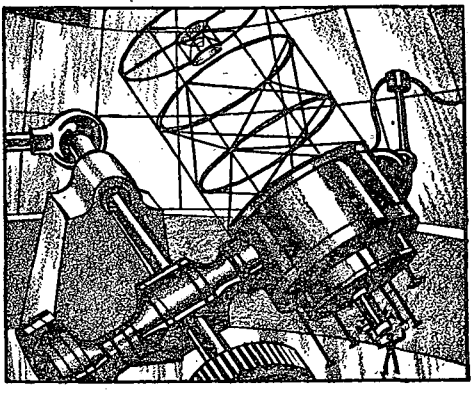
BOOKSHELF

Reviews of New Books

YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS, edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty, Frederick Fell, Inc., 351 pages, $3.50.

A SIMPLE mathematical calculation will prove that this book costs almost exactly a cent a page, which probably does not seem excessive. We have a quarrel with the title, however. We strongly doubt that these are actually the year's best novels, especially since none of them come from STARTLING. The authors are well known to us, however, as craftsmen, though all are not necessarily top men in the field.

Walter Miller's lead-off novel, IZZARD AND THE MEMBRANE, is a pretty good sample of the cybernetic brain story. The de-



tails of the machine's growing awareness are very well done but the climax is confusing, with characters popping in and out of dimensions never well explained. And the ending is Pollyanna-ish.

In THEN THERE WERE NONE, Eric Frank Russell turns his urbane wit upon Utopia —a world in which tyranny is impossible. An interesting feature of this story is the author's manipulation of the language to form new slang patterns which affect the social life of his planet. Very smoothly done.

Poul Anderson contributes a time travel yarn in FLIGHT TO FOREVER, done in colorful romantic style. Frank Robinson's THE

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HUNTING SEASON is the story of a traitor punished by being sent back to the 20th Century, where he is hunted by his appointed executioners in a game of wits which goes on until he can be caught and killed. And SEEKER OF THE SPHINX gives Arthur C. Clarke an opportunity to demonstrate his skill in handling difficult problems of culture, art, morals and degeneration with clarity and insight. All told, an interesting collection.

DESTINATION UNIVERSE by A. E. van Vogt, Pellegrini & Cudahy, New York, 295 pages, $3.00

IF YOU are at all concerned about an author's opinion of his own work you will be impressed with van Vogt's statement on the jacket that "the best of my short stories and novelettes are in this volume." This may well be true, though opinions may vary widely with different readers. "No great producer I, yet in the course of ten years," he says, "have turned out about a million and a half words, the equivalent of about twenty-five novels or three hundred short stories."

This anthology includes THE MONSTER, DORMANT, ENCHANTED VILLAGE, A CAN OF PAINT, DEFENSE, THE RULERS, DEAR PEN PAL, THE SOUND, FAR CENTAURUS, and THE SEARCH.

They are not all equally good, but they are plenty good enough. A writer as impressive as van Vogt deserves no petty picking and mumbling—he is one of the few top talents in the field and most of what he has written is worth anyone's time. This is not to say that he cannot be dull on occasion. Many of his multi-complex stories have, like the knight of old, "mounted and galloped off in all directions," leaving a very groggy reader behind. And while this technique impresses one at first reading, it does not after three or four heavy doses of it.

Still, it is a relief to find that vV can write a simple straight-forward suspense story like ENCHANTED VILLAGE or A CAN OF PAINT, in which the hero is handed an apparently insoluble problem and a limited time in which to solve it. In these stories vV adopts a simple, sparse technique which is admirably suited for making a story gallop. On the whole, this is a good sample case of van Vogt's wares.

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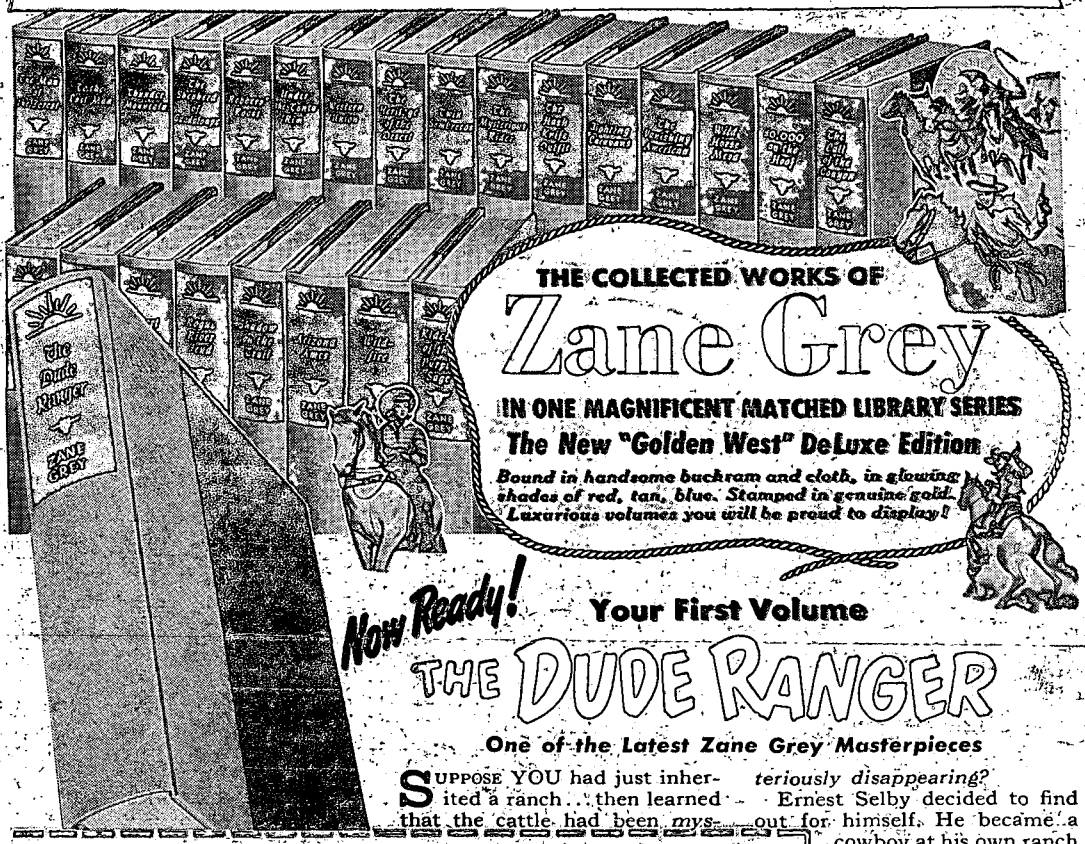
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